Dark Frontier Blues 3

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Table of Contents

【Prologue】
【Chapter 1: Negros / The Request】
【Chapter 2: Dallas / The Deadly Blade】
【Chapter 3: Cazeline Pass / The Conspiracy】
【Chapter 4: Zozwell / Reclamation】
【Chapter 5: Zozwell / Showdown】
【Epilogue】
Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa

【Prologue】

The howling hot wind was a dark, ominous force.The air, thick with soot and dust, raced by accompanied by an eerie whistling sound. In the distance, beyond the reddish-brown sand, clusters of sheer rocky mountains stood in formation.

This was the Zoana Desert, located in the Atlas region at the heart of the vast New Continent. The town of Ragon, a regional city belonging to the city-state of Shian, was also shrouded in the black wind. Even in this remote frontier, where ominous clouds hid the sun, humanity still clung desperately to life.

“Uncle Rob, our order, please!” As soon as they entered the shop, the two girls called out in lively voices. They ran across the worn floorboards and took their usual table. Still only fifteen or sixteen, the two girls—one with blonde hair, the other with black—had just finished their shift at the sewing factory.

“Ah, is that you, Claire and the others! It’s pretty busy right now, you know!” In the back of the shop, a short old man was frantically tossing a frying pan. “Just give me a minute! I’ll have your drinks out in a flash!”

“Hurry up, old man! We’re exhausted today~”

“If you don’t bring them out in a minute, I might just die~”

“Ha ha! So Cactus Soda is the best medicine, is it!” Choking on the steam, the old man stirred, sautéed, and fanned the vegetables.

In addition to the sizzling sounds, the small diner was filled with the hustle and bustle of rush hour. It was a dark, cramped, dusty diner with only seven tables - yet, despite its humble appearance, it was incredibly bustling.

The blonde girl named Claire looked around the restaurant with a sleepy expression.

“What’s the matter? It’s crowded again today. I should have come in earlier!”

“It’s been packed for the past two weeks, hasn’t it? Well, I guess it can’t be helped.” Her best friend, Amia, said with a sly grin. “Everyone’s here to see the new waitress, you know. Well, we are too, though.”

“Totally. Just seeing her smile makes all the day’s fatigue melt away.” Claire peered into the bustling kitchen with a dreamy look in her eyes.

From the back of the kitchen, the “new waitress” fluttered out. “Ah, welcome!” Her white frilled apron fluttered as she bowed with a voice like the ringing of a bell. Swaying her golden hair that shone at her shoulders, the “new waitress” nimbly crossed the dining area. “Claire, Amia, thank you for coming again!”

At the sight of her, the girls let out a collective squeal.

“Aww, you’re so cute today too! Justice-kun!”

“I just had to come again today! I can’t end my day without seeing Justice-kun’s face!”

Justice… The “new waitress” called by that name was unmistakably a boy - and yet his skin was fairer than the two girls frolicking at the table, and his golden hair shone with a lustrous sheen. His sky-blue eyes were clear as crystal and his smile was reminiscent of an angel in a sacred painting.

“Thank you. The usual, right?” With a beaming smile, the Saxon boy glided over to the counter. With practiced ease, he took out two glasses and filled them with ice.

After pouring cactus soda from the barrel, he swiftly returned and cheerfully handed over the glasses. “What’ll you have today? We still have the daily special.”

“I’m not sure about today… I’ll have the Rock Lizard Spicy Stew Set!”

“I’ll have the Black Cactus and Desert Oyster Stir-fry, extra large!”

Justice quickly jotted down the orders on the notepad he’d pulled out. “Sure thing! Boss, Rock Lizard Spicy Stew Set and Black Cactus with Desert Oysters, table four!”

Claire and Amia smiled at his carefree profile. “You’re full of energy today, Justice. You must be getting pretty used to the job by now, right?”

“Of course! It’s been two weeks already! I’m not a rookie forever, you know.” Seeing Justice stand tall, the two girls raised their glasses and smiled at him. It wasn’t just the two of them. All the customers were watching Justice’s every move. Taking orders, serving food. Something so simple was captivating people and putting them at ease.

Rob, the owner, smiled and handed the next dish to the boy who was like a grandson to him. “The stir-fried red lettuce set meal is ready! It’s for Table 6!”

“Ah, I’m on my way... Wait, whoa!” His clear voice suddenly cracked. At the same moment, the counter chair toppled over, and a loud crash echoed through the shop.

“A-are you okay, Justice?”

“Ah, ha... I tripped... but I’m fine...” The boy gave a sheepish smile to the worried Rob. Instantly, roars of laughter erupted from the dining area. Justice scratched his head sadly and looked over at the shattered chair. “Sorry, old man… Please just deduct the cost of the chair from my pay.”

“It’s fine. That chair was old anyway. More importantly, I’m just glad you’re not hurt.”

At those words, Claire and Amia suddenly stood up.

“Really?! I’m so glad you’re not hurt!”

“But aren’t you hurting somewhere?”

“Hey, does this hurt? How about here? Or here?”

Like ants swarming over sugar, the girls surrounded Justice. Seizing the moment, they stroked his lustrous blond hair and massaged his white, soft skin.

“Ah, I’m fine, really, I’m fine.”

“Really? I was so worried about you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Claire! I was worried too!”

“Whoa, not there... I’m fine, I can stand up! Hey, you don’t have to touch me that much!”

The girls pressed their chests against him in an exaggerated manner. At that sensation, Justice felt the blood from his entire body rush to his head.

“I-I don’t think this is appropriate… I’m on duty, after all!”

“Oh, come on, you’re blushing! Justice, you’re so cute!”

“I’m a man, too! I can’t just be touching a young lady before her wedding…”

“Don’t be so uptight! Well then, Justice, marry me!”

“That’s so unfair! Then I’ll marry you too!”

“What?! I was the one who set my sights on Justice first!”

“Y-you two, please calm down!”Justice backed away, trying to flee to the back of the shop.

But from behind him...

“Skipping work to flirt? You’ve got some nerve...” A voice, strained with suppressed anger, rang out, piercing everyone’s hearts.

Claire and Amia’s faces instantly turned pale and froze.

Only Justice remained, turning around with a carefree smile still on his face. “Huh? Who are you saying is slacking off?”

“You, Justice!” A muscular arm, driven by rage, tightened around Justice’s neck.

The one who had appeared was a waitress with bright red hair. She wore the same frilly apron as Justice and was likely in her mid-teens - but her fiery hair trembled with rage, and her red eyes blazed with fury. Far from being a waitress, she was a

Roman girl who could hardly even be called a young girl. “You make me chop wood while you get to grope away? You’ve got it pretty good, don’t you!”

“Tch, that’s not it... She was just worried about me because I fell!”

“You were clearly happy to have her boobs pressed against you! I won’t let you say otherwise!”

“It’s a—it’s a misunderstanding, Riot!” Justice flailed his arms and legs frantically.

Unable to bear the sight any longer, the shop owner, Rob, let out a deep sigh. “Not again, Riot... Bullying Justice every single day...”

“But Dad, Justice is flirting with Claire and the others every single day!”

“Ehh, we didn’t do anything wrong, did we?”

“That’s right, we’re just getting along.”

“Or are you just jealous because your partner, Justice, is being taken away from you?”

At Claire and the others’ exaggerated whispering, Riot threw Justice aside.

“What did you say?! Claire, one more time... AAAAAHHH!” With a pitiful scream, this time Riot was slammed onto the floor.

She’d tripped over the remains of the chair Justice had broken.

“Riott... are you okay?” Justice peered at his partner fearfully. Claire, Amia, and the customers were all stifling their laughter. Right before everyone’s eyes, Riot stood up, his whole body trembling.

“If you’re gonna break stuff, at least clean it up right away, Justice!”

“Y-yeah, you’re right....”

“Seriously… there’s not a single day that goes by without you messing something up!”

“That’s why I said I’d pay for it!”

“You’re such an idiot~ If we pay for this, our entire paycheck will go down the drain! We’re only working here because we ran out of travel money! Once we save up enough, we’re quitting this place and heading to the next town, right?”

“Th-this place... Riott, you begged us so desperately...”

“Oh, that’s right... Here you go! Red Leta Set, your order is ready!” Though a little late, she carried the food to Table 6 and gave Rob a wink.

Justice also gave a slight bow and quickly began clearing away the broken chair.

Claire and the others looked at the two part-timers with puzzled expressions. “W-who on earth are you guys...?”

Every single customer was feeling that same question.

The two had arrived in the town of Ragon two weeks ago in a sturdy-looking buggy. The buggy parked in front of the shop was loaded with countless bags. They wouldn’t say what they were. In fact, they hadn’t revealed the purpose of their journey or even their occupations. There was no malice in Justice’s clear eyes or in Riot’s overly honest words - but the two of them seemed far too mysterious.

“Hey, Uncle Rob, come on, just tell us already~” Claire called out to the shopkeeper, the only one who knew the truth. “Who is Justice really? I’m dying to know.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re the only one who knows, right?”

“Hmm… Well, that’s true, but I promised to keep it a secret.” Wiping down a washed glass, Rob gave them a helpless smile.

“Why not?! You could tell us! We come here every day!”

“I wouldn’t tell you even if you ate three meals a day here. Sorry about that.” Riot chimed in, sounding exasperated. “Besides, snooping on other people is in poor taste, Claire.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You’re so stingy! I don’t think it’s even a big secret anyway!”

“That’s right. It’s not a big secret. It’s totally boring even if you ask.”

“When you put it like that, it just makes me want to know even more!”

Riot silently ignored Claire’s protest. Perhaps because they were close in age, the two had become as close as old friends over the past two weeks. Still, Riott stubbornly refused to spill the beans. Claire pouted, her lips pressed into a fine line. “You could at least tell us!”

“Excuse me, Claire. That’s the one thing I can’t… Oh, thank you! Come again!” With an apologetic smile, Justice saw the departing customer off.

Riot began quickly wiping down the tables where people had finished eating.

Rob narrowed his eyes happily as he watched the two of them work efficiently. Justice, washing dishes, kept breaking them, while Riott, the waitress, kept snapping at customers who were slow to order - but the moment they hurriedly switched roles, customers started pouring in. Justice was a hit with the customers, and people began gathering just to see her smile. Riot, despite being a woman, handled heavy labor like splitting firewood and carrying charcoal with ease. It was a pleasant surprise for Rob. “Really... you’re doing a great job...”

“What’s up, old man? Who are you talking about? Stop talking to my wife in heaven on your own.” With a loud clatter, Riot set the dishes down at the sink.

“You’re done with the orders, aren’t you? Take a break. Overworking is bad for an old man’s health.”

Just then, Justice, who had finished clearing another plate, walked over. “That’s right. We’ll be fine on our own for a while.”

“Hmm… At this hour, customers should still be coming in…” Rob stretched widely and looked out the window.

It was still early evening. There were people walking by outside the glass window. That glass window... suddenly began to rattle. Soon, the shaking grew more intense.

“What is it? An earthquake?” Just as Claire and Amia noticed the tremors, Riot shot a sharp glance around the room.

The entire shop—no, the entire block—was shaking. It was being shaken violently. The tremors traveled up from deep within the earth, jolted upward, and reached their feet. At that moment...

“Get out the back door! Quick!” Suddenly, Riot shouted in a sharp voice.

“Right underneath us... a Mutant Beast!”

“Riot!” Justice screamed, and the plate slipped from his hand. It shattered, and at the same moment, screams filled the shop. Something blew the floorboards apart, and countless heads burst up from the ground. The impact shattered the window glass, and a massive cloud of dust swirled through the air. Accompanied by the black winds of the Zoana Desert, the slimy, massive body leaped toward the customer seating area.

“I-It’s an I-Worm!” Rob shouted as he yanked a shotgun from the shelf.
The I-Worm, a mutated beast. A swarm of carnivorous earthworms rendered ferocious by magical arts. Writhing
and tangled together, it swung its multiple heads—each a meter in diameter—and lunged at its prey
with savage fangs.
“No way, why is it in the middle of town?!” He quickly reloaded and fired a rapid burst. The I-Worm that was shot through let out a scream and crushed the table. Even so, another fang sank straight into the neck of a customer.
“Gaaaaaah!” Dark, fresh blood splattered against the wall. Lured by the blood, several fangs sank into the victim. It took less than ten seconds for the human form to collapse into a mass of flesh.
“Everyone, escape through the back door!” Justice flung the door open and, pursing his lips, looked up at the mutated beast.
The I-worm, which had emerged from the depths, was sticking its heads out not just into the store, but all the way onto the street.
Aiming at its massive body, Rob fired another burst from his shotgun. “Run, Dad…!”
Immediately after the shot, one of the heads leaped toward Rob’s head. Justice dived in from the side and knocked it back onto the floor. The I-worm’s blow shattered the counter and smashed through the floor.
“Please get out of here quickly, with everyone else! We’ll handle this!”
“Handle this... but—” Carried by Justice, Rob retreated to the wall.
Mutant beasts kept emerging one after another from beneath the floor. The panicked patrons hadn’t reached the back exit yet.
“Justice, run! We don’t stand a chance!”
“The knights will be here soon! Let’s get out of here!” Claire and Amia also reached out to Justice, crying out.
As if to shield the chaos, Riot, clad in an apron, stood in front of Iworm. “I said I’d handle this! Can’t you hear me?!” With that, Riot kicked off the floor. With a phenomenal leap, she recklessly charged straight into I-worm’s embrace. The speed with which she dodged the beast’s counterattack was beyond human capability. In a voice that was almost too calm, Riot raised both arms toward the mutated beast. “....So, in the end, we have to fight here too!”
As she shouted, curved blades shot out from both of Riot’s wrists. A red, high-pressure thermal laser wrapped itself around the blade, which easily exceeded thirty centimeters in length. Swinging the curved blade from side to side, Riot instantly sliced off the mutant beast’s head.“Flame Heat Blade!”
The severed head slammed into the wall and rolled across the floor. Riot mercilessly hacked away at the Iworm’s body - even as she was drenched in rust-colored bodily fluids, her ferocious assault did not cease; Riot even tore the mutant beast’s body apart with her fists. This was not something a human
could possibly do. Seeing her like this, everyone had even forgotten to flee.
“Ri-Riot, you…” Claire finally realized who she was, but Riot charged forward again.

Spraying foul-smelling bodily fluids, the I-worm's countless bodies trembled violently. Seizing that opening, Riot slipped past the mutant beast and rolled out onto the main street.

"Hey, what are you doing! It's dangerous!"

Suddenly, a voice rang out.

The knights had finally arrived to defeat the mutated beasts spilling out onto the street. The group, clad in silver plate armor and armed with longswords, was stunned to see Riot in an apron.

"It's dangerous, so leave this to us...!" The knight who began to speak was rendered speechless by the curved blade extending from Riot's wrist.

Licking her red lips, the waitress from Rob's shop glanced at the knights.

"You're telling me to leave it to you? Then go ahead!" She shouted defiantly, then tore the neck of a closing-in Iworm clean off with her bare hands. "But this one's a tough opponent!" She swung the thick, fiery blade like a tornado, halting the mutant beast's pursuit.

At Riot's fierce battle, the knights' voices trembled with awe. "You are… the Battle Armor Demon!"

The knights, the fleeing civilians, Claire, Amia, and the customers inside the shop—all trembled with equal terror at that name. A mechanical combat unit with every part of its body—except the brain—artificially constructed. A human weapon with countless weapons built into its body. Everyone held their breath at the sight of this embodiment of slaughter, the stuff of legend.

But Riot never paused, sweeping her Flaming Blade through the air and dodging every attack from the mutated beasts. "Let me have a little show, Ragn Knights!"

The hungry I-worms swelled in number and attacked the knights as well. They swept aside the heavily armored soldiers and slammed them into the walls of houses. Swiftly dodging sword strikes, they leaped forward with ferocious intent to bite through the exposed nape of the neck where the armor ended. "Hold your ground! Raise your shields! Form a square!" Faced with the relentless assault, the knights countered with a shrinking defensive formation.

Ignoring them, Riot ran toward his armored buggy, which lay overturned in front of the shop. "Justice!" She called out to her partner and pulled a long, narrow package from the seat. In response, the boy stood up.

"Rob, please stay hidden…"

"Are you coming too?"

Nodding, the blond boy clenched his fist. "This is my mission…"

"Justice, where are you going…"

But Justice pressed his lips together with a resolute expression and dashed out of the store in one go. "Over here, Riot!" As soon as he burst out onto the main street, he rolled onto the ground and held out his right hand to his partner.

Aiming at Justice, Riot quickly hurled the contents of the package they'd dragged out. Here it comes! "T-they're coming!"

“Don’t drop it, you idiot! It’s my livelihood!” Piercing through the black wind, it was hurled into the air. What emerged from the package was a golden staff. At its tip, a rare gem glowed red.

“Isn’t that the Holy War Staff?!” One of the knights noticed and cried out.

“Ah, the only one allowed to wield that is...”

“First strike!” Justice stirred up a cloud of dust and firmly seized the staff. Then, after deftly dodging the Iwom’s attack,

he leapt to his feet and slammed the Ripping Blade into the mutated beast. The blond-haired boy formed a holy seal with his right hand and thrust the Holy War Staff toward the swarm of Iworms. “Circumventing Impact Bolt!” A pale blue plasma erupted from Justice’s holy seal. At the same time, a bolt of lightning shot into the sky and raced toward the mutant beasts’ heads. The lightning bolt, soaring directly above the Iwom, split into four, zigzagging sharply as it plummeted. Upon impact, a flash of lightning burst forth. Several of the Mutant Beast’s heads were violently blown off.

“T-That was truly...”

“Oh, a mid-tier offensive miracle... if so...!” Voices of admiration rose not only from the knights but also from the fleeing crowd.

At the center of their gaze, Justice, staff in hand, held aloft the Holy Seal.

Claire and Amia held their breath as they stared at the blond-haired boy. “A Holy War Officer...”

The Holy War Officer—one granted permission to wield the power of the Creator God, Aioros, and to perform miracles. Among the Holy Believers spread far and wide across the New Continent, Officers were the ones with the strongest faith. Only such people were granted by the Creator God the ability to defeat the magic that ran rampant in the world. A prodigy found in one out of tens of thousands. The agent of God who drives out evil. That was the Holy Warrior... Justice’s true identity.

“Justice was a Holy Warrior... Uncle Rob, did you know that?!”

“U-um... sort of.”

“Then why did you keep it a secret until now?!” In response to Claire’s question, Rob lowered his eyes and nodded. For some reason, a look of anguish crossed his face. Right before their eyes, Justice and Riot had surrounded the writhing mutated beast from both sides. Their eyes met for a moment, and they nodded silently to each other. With that single signal, the Holy Warrior leapt backward, and the Battle Armor Demon charged the Iworm once more.

“Yeeeees!” With a roar, Riot sliced through the mutated beast with her Blazing Sword. I-worms continued to emerge from the ground, unhesitatingly surrounding the Battle Armor Demon. Their slime-covered torsos wrapped themselves around Riot’s arms and legs. In the blink of an eye, the Battle Armor Demon’s limbs were immobilized.

“Don’t let them take down that Armored Demon! Ragn Knights, advance!” The knights launched a simultaneous charge. Seeking to aid Riot, they slashed at the mutated beasts with their longswords - but the I-worms’ brute strength effortlessly repelled

the heavily armored knights. Screams rose from the broken ranks and echoed from all around.

“Riot! He’s going to crush you! Run!” It was Claire who shouted. She dashed out of the shop and screamed at the Armored Demon.

But Riot turned around and flashed a terrifying grin for a split second. “I have to do this to defeat him!” With a roar, the Armored Demon grabbed hold of several of the necks. With all her might, she squeezed its body - ignoring the I-worm writhing in agony, Riot steadied her footing and braced her arms. “I have no intention of losing!”

Dust and clods of earth flew up with the impact. Riot forcibly dragged the I-worm out from beneath the ground. The main body of the entangled carnivorous earthworm resembled a network of underground stems. The part that could be called its main root was plump and swollen pink, oozing a repulsive slime. At that hideous sight, the look on Riot’s face betrayed her certainty of victory.

“Don’t let go, Justice!”

“I know! Miracle Amplification, ready!” Justice, who had been retreating, suddenly cried out. A flash of light even more intense than before now swirled around his clasped fingertips. While Riot threw herself in front of him to buy time, the boy had been increasing the power of his next miracle.

“Second Strike: Divine Inferno Falling Strike!” Along with the incantation, the miracle transformed into a white light that enveloped I-worm’s main root. It was a sequence of ancient sacred characters, a sacred barrier designed to bind the mutated beast.

“Tchah…!” Even the knights averted their eyes from the blinding holy light. Before their very eyes, the ancient sacred characters erupted in a powerful burst of flame. The flames pierced through Iwom’s underground roots, sweeping through like a raging torrent and incinerating everything in their path. Leaving behind eerie screams, the mutated beasts’ heads

fell one after another to the ground.

“W-what the...” Amia stood up, dazed. Rob stood speechless, staring intently at the mutated beasts’ demise. Even the Knights watched the end of the battle in silence. That was how devastating the strike had been.

And the one who had unleashed that strike was a slender, delicate boy. Justice clutched his Holy War Staff, staring intently at the burning corpses of the mutated beasts. Suddenly, his body swayed. He bent his knees weakly and exhaled deeply.

“It’s… over…”

“Justice, are you okay?” Panicking, Riot tore away the Iworms that had wrapped themselves around him and rushed over. The blond boy didn’t even have the strength to wipe the sweat streaming down his forehead.

“Don’t worry… “That first strike... I was in a hurry...”

“Don’t stand up yet. It’s better if you stay like that for a while.” Riot gently patted the boy’s small back.

Concerned, knights and even the crowd rushed over to him. “Holy War Officer, are you all right?!”

“That was magnificent! Are you unharmed?”
To the knights of this small town, a Holy War Officer was a figure beyond their reach. They all knelt, speaking in deferential tones.
“Don’t worry about me... Worry about the person who was injured...”
“I’m more worried about you! You’re as pale as a ghost!” Pushing through the crowd, Claire ran over. Her gaze met Riot’s. “Why didn’t you tell me, Riott!”
“Claire…”
“Why did you hide the fact that you’re a Holy War Officer! Why did you hide the fact that you’re a Battle Armor Demon…” Claire demanded, her voice filled with anger. Supporting the boy’s back, Riot remained silent.
The crowd, too, stared intently at the two of them. The Battle Armor Demon’s lips trembled painfully. “Even if I told you…” Just as she lowered his gaze... “Get out of the way! It’s dangerous!” Riot suddenly sprang to her feet. He swung the flaming blade on her arm once more. From above, several still-living Iworms were attacking with ferocity.
“Aaaaaaah!” “Get back! They’re still alive!” Claire’s screams and the knights’ shouts intertwined.
In the midst of it all, Riot narrowly managed to slash away the first one.
Body fluids sprayed into the air, but the next one clamped down on the Battle Armor Demon’s wrist. Sharp fangs pierced the synthetic skin without mercy. Riot’s movements were halted for an instant. “Claire, get down on the ground!” She warned, reaching for her waist. But the item he always carried wasn’t there today.
She’d taken off his handgun while working her part-time job as a waitress. She reached for it out of habit but was now grasping at thin air.
But another I-worm’s fangs were already at the throat of Claire, who hadn’t managed to escape in time. “Claire, get down on the ground—quickly…!” Riot tore the clinging I-worm from him with brute force.
“Final Strike!”
“Noooooo!”
Pushing aside the roars and screams, a resolute voice cut through the air.
Before anyone realized it, Justice had risen to her feet and was raising her Holy Seal. But at the sight of the Holy Seal glowing at his fingertips, Riot’s face twisted in horror.
“Justice, I’ll handle this.....!”
“Circumventing Impact Bolt!” Another offensive miracle shot forth from Justice’s holy seal. The plasma lightning flashed past Claire’s hair and, at point-blank range, pierced the I-worm’s head. Moments later, its flesh was blown to pieces. “Claire!” Riot threw herself over the fallen Claire. Covered in fragments of the charred, mutated beast, the two girls remained motionless for a moment.
“Claire! Riot!” With a voice choked with tears, Amia rushed over as well. As if awakened by that voice, Claire opened her eyes and slowly helped Riot to her feet.
“Thank you, Riot... Thank you, Justice...”
Trembling at the terror that had closed in before her eyes, Claire peered into Riot’s face.
But the Battle Armor Demon remained silent. She lowered her eyes and bit her lip tightly. And the moment Justice and Claire shifted their gaze...

“Eeek!”

Claire’s throat trembled as if seized by a spasm. Before her eyes, Justice was crawling on the ground, his gaze wandering with exhaustion.

“C-Claire… I’m so glad…” But Claire, along with the surrounding knights and the crowd, were all staring intently at Justice’s hands.

On the boy’s small hands, an eerily twisted pattern was glowing red.

“T-That’s the Heretical Mark!” The moment someone shouted, panic spread instantly. The crowd fled indoors to hide, and even the knights retreated without a second glance.

Everyone knew it. It was the mark of the Blood Pact—the emblem of the servants of the dark god who ruled the world... the mark of the Heretical Sect.

“C-Claire, what is this...?”

“No, don’t come near me!” Screaming, Claire backed away. Without thinking, she clenched a clump of dirt in her fist and hurled it wildly.

But standing before Justice was the Battle Armor Demon. The clump of dirt Claire had thrown struck him squarely in the cheek. Black, filthy sand slammed hard against Riot’s face.

“Ah… ah……” Sitting on her haunches, Claire looked up at Riot.

Her crimson eyes flickered with sorrow, and her lips were clenched as if he were enduring something. Pushing the fear aside in her heart, a searing sense of regret welled up within Claire.

“Ri-Riot, I...!”

“You lot... were members of the Blood Pact!?” A roar that drowned out her voice echoed through the air. It was the knight corps, having reformed their ranks. The soldiers aligned their blades in perfect order and faced Riot and Justice head-on. Yet, obvious fear was evident on the knights’ faces. If they were Blood Pact members, they were servants of an Evil Spirit. They wielded the power known as Magic. The knights possessed no ability to resist it.

“Be still! We shall bind you!” Even as they spoke, the knights stood frozen in fear, unable to move a single step.

Seeing this, Riot calmly picked up Justice. Without a word, she carried him to their buggy and tore off his frilly apron. She tossed hers aside, looking as if she were reluctant to part with it

"Hey, pops..." She called out to the shopfront where he had lived for two weeks. Rob stepped out calmly from the cowering crowd. She tossed the apron at his feet. “I guess it really doesn’t suit me. I’m sorry...”

“I just wanted to thank you for all your hard work...”

“I’m afraid I’m going to be a burden to you from now on...”

“It’s fine... Justice’s father saved my life. I was happy to be able to thank his son.”

Silence and a dark wind swept between the two of them.

Riot scanned the stares of those around him. Overcome by terror, not a single person moved. She slowly looked down at Claire and let out a deep sigh. “Well then...”

“Riot!”

Without even wiping the dirt from her cheeks, Riot climbed into the buggy. The engine roared in irritation, kicking up a cloud of dust. As the Battle Armor Demon pressed the accelerator, the vehicle carrying the two of them
roared out of the city of Ragn. All that remained behind was a moment of silence and the passing of a polluted black wind.
“Ro... Rob…!” As if released from a spell, the older knights suddenly cried out. “Who are those people! You must have hired them!”
“With that heretical crest, they must be Blood Pact members! What do you think you’re doing!” But Rob stepped out onto the main street and continued to watch the receding car.
“That child… is no Blood Ally…”
“Then why does he bear the mark of the heretical sect! He must be a false Crusader!”
At those shouts, Rob turned around and quietly pointed at the corpse of the mutated beast. “That child has been granted a miracle… He is a true Holy Crusader. He saved us as proof of that…”
“W-well, that’s true…” Even now, the knights felt a chill run down their spines at the sight of the charred corpse of the Iworm.
And once more, Rob cast his gaze toward the horizon, obscured by the black wind.
“That child is a Holy Warrior, no matter what anyone says... and so is his father...”
Claire cursed herself inwardly. Why had she trembled with fear in that split second? They were such kind people, yet just seeing that mark for a split second... “I... I...” Claire slammed her clenched fist against her knee. She felt an overwhelming urge to apologize.
Amia gently embraced her from behind. Then she looked in the same direction as Rob.
But the sound of the engine had already faded, and the car had vanished into the dust.
The “new waitresses” from Rob’s shop never returned to the town again.

【Chapter 1: Negros / The Request】

It is said that there were once eight continents on the planet.
On the planet created by the God of Creation, Aeolus, countless civilizations flourished in prosperity - but hundreds of millions of evil spirits shattered that peace and banished the Creator God into the depths of darkness. It was a rebellion against the Supreme God, instigated by the Evil God Emperor Lucifer.
The sun was shrouded in demonic clouds, and the constellations were swallowed by darkness. Through Lucifer’s dark magic, the eight continents collided and transformed into a single, massive continent. The upheaval consumed the eight billion people of humanity, and civilization was wiped out without a trace.
This was the apocalypse known as the “Ancient Catastrophe.” Two thousand years have passed since then.
In a new world known as the New Continent, humanity has continued to struggle to rebuild itself. While being tormented by the Evil Spirits and their forces, they have clung desperately to the belief in the resurrection of the Creator God.

In uncharted mountains and wilderness, in the far north, and in the scorching desert... There wasn't a single star in the night sky.

The searing heat of the day had faded, and the Zoana Desert was rapidly cooling down at night. To escape the cold and the polluted black wind, the two travelers huddled around a campfire in the shadow of a rocky mountain.

"I've made some tea." Riot poured some Shiron tea into a small cup. The Battle Armor Demon wore leather armor and a grimy cloak to ward off the biting wind. Two large pistols hung at her waist, and a massive greatsword lay beside her. It was her usual travel attire.

"You've been looking down ever since we got here. Are you still… worried about it?"

"I feel like Rob is gonna get in trouble because of me now…" Justice took the cup and muttered quietly. The blond boy, as always, wore the white sacred robes that signified his status. Stroking the Holy War Staff lying beside him, Justice took a sip of the hot Shiron tea. "He's an old acquaintance of Dad's, and I ended up taking advantage of him… I really shouldn't have stayed so long…"

"It can't be helped. I needed to earn some travel money in that town for a while... Do you want some sugar?

"

"Yeah, please." Justice took the small jar and added a spoonful of reddish-brown sugar to his cup.

Riot looked down at the boy and took a sip of her own Shiron tea. "Besides… I was the one who said you should hide your identity if you were staying for a while. I just never thought you'd end up having to flee the town the moment you were discovered."

"Sorry, it's my fault, isn't it…"

"No, it's the Mutant Beasts' fault. You just saved everyone like you always do. You've got nothing to regret. We've just returned to our travels." Riot smiled and gave him a wink. Justice's face softened slightly, and he stirred another pinch of sugar into his cup.

It had been two weeks since their buggy ran out of fuel during their journey.

Fortunately, they had managed to reach the provincial town of Ragon, so the two decided to look for live-in work. That said, the two of them…

No, Justice had a secret that must never be revealed. If they stayed too long, it would inevitably come to light. It was precisely because they knew this that the two had never tried to stay in one town for long.

But Rob... Justice's father's old friend, gladly took them in. He gave them a taste of city life for the first time in a long while. Just for two weeks...

(Honestly... We really did take advantage of him...) Though she tried to comfort Justice, Riot felt a twinge of regret as well.

A journey like theirs was meant to be spent spending the night in the vast, desolate wilderness. The hardships of their journey were something they should have borne alone. After all, avoiding towns and avoiding people...

Whoosh—the night wind howled forcefully overhead. Riot activated the night vision function of her cybernetic eye and surveyed the midnight desert. The scattered rocky mountains and...

the vast desert were enveloped in silence. For a moment, it felt as though they were the only two people in the world.

(But... we've just returned to our journey... The journey to find Justice's father...) Turning her gaze, she saw Justice scooping sugar again by the campfire. His profile, illuminated by the flames, occasionally radiated an almost unapproachable beauty. His still childlike charm made him look like an angel, no matter how many times she saw him

(Why does this kid have to go through this...) The question she asked myself countless times over the past two years wells up inside her. (But there's nothing I can do about it now.)

All this battle-hardened armor-clad demon could do was share the boy's hardships.

"Anyway... let's get out of this country as soon as possible." Riot exhaled heavily and tossed a fire starter into the campfire. "The Atlas region has better-developed trade routes than other areas. What happened in the city of Ragn should already have reached the neighboring towns and villages by now. You don't want another fight, do you?"

"Yeah, that's probably for the best. But… I'm done hiding my identity." Justice added another spoonful of sugar and pulled a chocolate cake out of his pocket. "I'm a Holy War Officer wherever I am. I don't care what anyone says." He took a hearty bite of the cake, generously topped with whipped cream. Then he stirred his cup with a spoon

and washed it down with a sip of Shiron tea, looking as though he was enjoying every drop.

Riot grimaced at the dessert combination. "How many spoons of sugar did you put in there? How can you eat cake with tea that sweet?"

"Really? I think it's delicious."

"I feel like I'm going to get sick from all that sugar..." Right before Riot's exasperated eyes, the boy happily devoured the cake.

The night breeze swept past their heads once more. It had been a very long time since the two of them had lain down on the ground together.

The Atlas Region is located in the central part of the New Continent.

It is the region with the most city-states and the most developed infrastructure. Naturally, it also has the largest population.

The city-state of Shian, which stretches across the southern part of the Zoana Desert, also belonged to the Atlas Region. Although referred to as a city-state, it does not consist of a single city. It is a collective term for an urban network centered on the Central City—with a population of over 500,000—surrounded by satellite cities, and further surrounded by regional towns. The total population easily exceeds one million.

The cities within the territory are connected by trade routes, and countless trading inns dot the paths.

The row of a dozen or so houses visible ahead was one such small trading post...

"We should restock here... but still..." Sliding out of the driver's seat of the armored buggy, Riot shielded her eyes from the sand with her palm. "This sandstorm is worse than the one in Ragon..."

The desert was shrouded in suffocating heat. The dark clouds were growing denser from the north, and the wind was picking up. The concentration of soot and dust was terrible. It felt as though they were right in the middle of a polluted storm. In fact, Riot's retinas displayed the magical radiation levels in the atmosphere, and the text was clearly colored yellow. It was a dangerous reading, exceeding the standard limit.

(It's okay because Justice's Holy War Staff is purifying the air, though...) Riot braved the sandstorm and looked up at the sheer rocky mountains looming overhead. The trading post, Negros, clung desperately to the mountainside.

"We're running a little low on water. I'll go buy some." Justice stepped out of the passenger seat, his holy robes fluttering in the wind. But Riot gazed at the side of the inn with a displeased look.

"Wait, I'm coming too... I'm worried if you go alone."

"Eh? I won't buy too many snacks like last time, okay?"

"I can't trust anything you say." Ignoring her partner's grumbling, Riot slung her greatsword over her back.

Justice clenched hiz Holy War Staff as well, and the two of them stepped onto the street that ran through the inn town.

"Man, this trading post is totally run-down… I wonder if we can even buy water here?" Glancing at the shops on either side, Riot let out a sigh.

The entire town was covered in dust. The signs were leaning crookedly, and the window frames were half-sliding off. There were no people on the street, and most of the shops had their shutters down. It shouldn't be that late yet. The only shop still open seemed to be a combination tavern and inn.

"I'll go ask over there. Wait for me!"

"Hey, don't rush off like that!" But Justice ran up the steps in front of the shop and energetically pushed open the double doors.

"Um, excuse me... WAHHH!" His voice trailed off midway, turning into a scream.

Instinctively, Riot drew her pistol from his waist.

A massive shadow was slowly emerging from inside the shop. Its entire body was covered in bristling gray fur, and its gleaming eyes shone red. Its long, yellow fangs were as sharp as daggers. The creature that loomed before Justice was a giant dog, as big as a cow.

"W-w-waaaah!" Sliding down the stairs on his butt, Justice tumbled over in a pitiful heap. The massive demon dog clamped its jaws around his neck with a crunch.

"Waaah, let go! Riot~!"

"Don't move. I'm coming to save you!" Riot firmly locked her pistol's sights onto the target: the space between the demon dog's eyes.

"All artificial muscles, limiter disengaged. Automatic targeting function activated. Post-combat activities to be recorded in the Sphere." Text raced across the Battle Armor Demon's retinas. Point-blank range. There was no way she could miss. But...

"I'm surrounded...!" Riot's detection scanner simultaneously picked up countless heat sources. The stable to her right, the rooftops of the houses to her left... and directly behind her.

"Don't miss!" While still holding her pistol, she instantly swung her greatsword from behind her back. Her coat fluttered as he slashed without even confirming his target. But a loud metallic clang rang out, and sparks flew. The Battle Armor Demon's strike had been blocked by a massive spear.

"Guh...!" It was only then that Riot locked eyes with her opponent. Closing in directly behind her was a giant clad in heavy armor - though his face was hidden by a helmet, he stood over two meters tall. Even through the armor, it was clear he had a thick, muscular build. Moreover, he was firmly holding back Riot's sword strike.

This was clearly no ordinary physique.

"Who are you? State your name!" But there was no answer. Instead, the giant swung his spear upward, spun the tip in a sudden twist, and lunged at Riot, intent on cleaving her in two. The blade's wind kicked up a cloud of dust.

"Pretty quick for a guy your size!" Clicking her tongue, Riot made a sharp U-turn to his rear. The giant gave chase with ferocious intensity. He swung the spearhead left and right, charging forward to cleave Riot in two.

"I hate stubborn men!" Quickly regaining her composure, Riot fired rapid bursts from her large pistol at close range. She mercilessly pounded depleted uranium armor-piercing rounds into the colossal form - vut the colossus anticipated the shots at the last moment, smashed through the wall, and crashed into a nearby house.

"There's no way I'm letting him get away... Damn it!" The moment she spoke, an explosion erupted right before Riot's eyes. Snipers hidden on rooftops and inside the houses had begun firing precise shots at Riot's path. This wasn't just ordinary gunfire. It was an attack with high-pressure explosive-tipped arrows fired from a powerful crossbow. As Riot tried to retreat, she felt a sudden, strange sensation in the sand beneath her feet. She scrambled to jump back further, but a deafening roar erupted from the ground, sending a spectacular cloud of smoke billowing into the air.

The enemy had even laid a minefield here.

"Riot!" Her partner's scream echoed through the air. While dodging the explosion, Riot glanced in that direction.

The demon dog, clutching Justice in its jaws, burst out of the tavern and leaped onto the main street in a single bound.

At the tip of its snout, the blond boy was merely thrashing about helplessly.

"What a noisy bunch. First, I'll take care of that mutant beast!" Frustrated by the relentless attacks and traps, Riot holstered her pistol. Gripping her greatsword with both hands, she gripped it tightly and thrust the blade toward the massive, ferocious dog. The demon dog faced Riot head-on, standing with its front paws neatly together.

Then...

“All right, Gustav, good job. You’re such a good boy.” From the shadows of an alley, a woman with shimmering blonde hair stepped out with confidence. Her gaze was defiant; her shoulder-length hair flowed in gentle waves, and her blue eyes shone with a challenging light. She towered over Riot, displaying a physique that rivaled a man’s. Her black leather armor barely covered her body, leaving her white limbs almost entirely exposed. Straps held several throwing knives against her bare thighs. Clutching a black whip in her hand, the woman stroked the throat of a demon dog. “I’ll give you a treat later, good boy, good boy.”

“W-who are you~?” Pinned down by the ferocious dog growling in circles, Justice let out a pitiful cry. The woman ran her whip through its lashes and surveyed Justice with a contemptuous gaze. “Huh, I wondered what kind of guy you were, but you’re just a kid. The legendary Holy War Officer isn’t all that, is he?”

At those words, Riot’s eyebrows twisted in anger. “Who the hell are you, anyway... some out-of-work stripper?”

“Don’t talk back to me, you cyborg!” In response to Riot’s provocation, the woman slammed the whip she held into the sand. Then she licked her lips. “I am Houndmaster Rachel… I’ve been waiting for you lot at this inn.” She snapped her fingers. Instantly, figures hiding in the surrounding area emerged. Spearmen lined up on either side of Rachel. On the rooftops, archers and grenadiers rose to their feet. Those who emerged from the houses were carrying several wire-triggered landmines on their backs. They were engineers. And behind Riot, footsteps like an earthquake shook the ground.

A giant wielding an exceptionally long spear burst back out of the house. He removed his helmet, revealing his true face. Sweat glistened on his shaved head; he was a massive man in his twenties.

Each was a warrior clad in magnificent plate armor. Their flawless organized combat, superb coordination, and sly-looking faces... they were a familiar breed to Riot. “You lot are a mercenary unit... you must have a name, right?”

“The Red Flame Raiders...” Rachel tapped her shoulder pad to indicate it. “There’s not a soul in the Atlas region who doesn’t know us.” A blazing flame was marked in red on her shoulder pad. All the other mercenaries had the same emblem inscribed somewhere on their armor.

But Riot glanced at the mercenaries’ encircling formation and flashed a defiant smile. “You’re picking a fight with me knowing I’m a cyborg? You're one stupid lot.”

“I heard there was someone worth a lot of money hanging around in the city of Ragn.” Rachel, not to be outdone, curled her full lips into a smile. “I also heard there’s a Blood Sworn member disguised as a Holy Warrior...”

“Eeeeeya!” In an instant, Riot charged straight ahead. She raced in a straight line toward the demon hound that had captured Justice - but the demon hound, Gustav, showed no fear and opened its jaws wide. It spat out a massive fireball at high speed from the back of its throat. The fiery blast closed in on Riot, threatening to engulf her.

“Quite flashy!” Riot swung her greatsword from below, cleaving the fireball in two right before her eyes. The hot wind kicked up a cloud of sand. Using that as a

distraction, the Battle Armor Demon closed the distance to her target in one swift motion.

“Get back, Gustav!” Rachel cracked her whip, and the demon hound once again snatched up Justice. Without a word, it yanked him up and quickly retreated to the rear.

“Ah, it’s hot! I told you it’s hot!” Justice screamed as he was held in the demon hound’s still-scorching jaws. Taking his place, Rachel charged forward. Aiming for Riot’s face, she hurled a dagger from her thigh. It was a precise, lightning-fast move,

undeterred by the dust cloud. With a whizzing sound, the dagger sliced through the air - but the Battle Armor Demon swung the blade of her greatsword from side to side, knocking the thrown dagger away, but Riot knew this was merely a delaying tactic. As it closed in on Rachel, it spun abruptly and swung its greatsword at her back. A shrill, metallic clang echoed through the street. The blade was deflected by a massive spear. The giant from earlier had once again circled behind Riot.

“I told you I’d be persistent!” Slamming on the brakes mid-charge, Riot re-gripped her sword, aiming to cleave the giant’s massive form in two.

“Now’s your chance, Bulk! Go for it!”

Rachel shouted at the giant. “I’ll neutralized hermovements!” This time, Rachel had circled around to his side. Her whip flew through the air, wrapping itself around the Battle Armor Demon’s left wrist and greatsword. The whip, reinforced with a metal core, completely blocked Riot’s sword strike.

“Yeah, if you were just a regular human!”

In response, the giant raised his spear, whipping up a fierce gust of wind.

Justice screamed as the spearhead flashed overhead.

“Run, Riot! It’s dangerous!”

With a flash of a combative glint in his eyes, Riot twisted her restrained left wrist. Instantly, the joint snapped, and only her prosthetic hand and greatsword slipped clean out of the whip. Revealed on Riot’s left arm was the barrel of a gleaming black, triple-barreled 5.56mm mini-Gatling gun.

“Damn it!” Rachel clicked her tongue, tossed aside the whip, and dove into the alley. The giant, now right in front of her, tried to bring down a blow first.

But Riot, now free, easily escaped to the rear - then she pulled a large magazine from her waist. “I’m going to blow all of you to smithereens!” Riot aimed the muzzle at the giant and locked onto its target in an instant. But...

“Whoa, hold on a second, let’s not go that far.” The moment she heard the voice, Riot doubted her own hearing.

The young man’s voice was coming from right in front of her. But all she could see was the townscape of the inn district and the dry, sandy main street.

And only the figure of a giant brandishing a long spear.

(This can’t be…!) The Battle Armor Demon instantly boosted the sensitivity of his detection scanner. But she could detect no heat signature indicating the presence of a living being. Acoustic,

pressure—no reaction to either. Yet once again, the voice reached Riot. “Are you really going to use that against a flesh-and-blood human? You’ll obviously win, then - but is it worth it?"

“Show yourself. So, you’re a Blood Pact member, are you?” If there’s a demon dog that looks like nothing but a mutated beast, it wouldn’t be surprising to find a Blood Pact member here as well.

But his voice quickly turned into a sneer. “Don’t joke around. I’m just like you. In other words...”

For the first time, she sensed the other’s presence. “...I’m a Battle Armor Demon.”

Right before Riot's eyes, his vision wavered slightly. For a moment, it looked like a heat haze.

"What the hell?!"

But piercing through that waver, a man with black hair materialized. He was standing one meter in front of Riot.

Riot frantically tried to swing his gatling gun around, but he was too close. With his right hand, clad in a black leather glove, the man forcefully deflected the barrel upward. Then he slammed his left hand into Riot's solar plexus. The impact caused Riot's retinal display to flicker.

"Gah!" Despite her cry of agony, Riott grabbed the man's left wrist. She pinned him down and tried to kick her right foot into the man's chest - but her opponent struck first, kicking Riot's left leg away. Losing her balance, Riot crashed into the sand. "Damn it, let go!"

"Ri-Riot!" Riot's scream collided with Justice's shriek.

The man who had appeared effortlessly pinned Riot to the ground, flashing a defiant smile. "Well now, even I have to admit that was a perfect plan. But I'm surprised." He curled his lips and whistled. "I never would've guessed that the Blood Oath's companion was none other than the 'Man-Eating Dragon, Riot.' To capture her without firing a single shot—that's just like me. Way too cheap."

"Hey, who the hell are you?! I said move it!" Riot yelled, glaring up at the man in frustration.

He was a young man who looked to be around twenty. His unkempt black hair stood on end in a messy tangle, untied and unkempt. His confident black eyes were filled with ambition, and his muscular body was, as expected, clad in plate armor. On the chest plate, a massive, raging flame was emblazoned. "You're the one behind this ambush...!"

"That's right. I'm the leader of this bunch." Glancing at the mercenaries gathering around, the man puffed out his chest proudly. "I'm Zeed, captain of the Red Flame Raider. Looks like I'm a better Battle Armor Demon than you."

It was a name she'd never heard before.

Riot took another close look at Zeed's equipment. A pair of large electromagnetic knives hung from his waist on either side. These were expensive, rare weapons. What she had thought were leather gloves were actually "stun gloves," devices designed to unleash massive amounts of high-voltage electricity at an opponent. They were, as expected, expensive. All of them were weapons designed for close combat. He wasn't carrying any firearms. Even if he had them built into his body,, he seemed to excel at close-quarters combat. His movements just now made that clear. If that's the case...

(He's far too formidable...) Riot gritted her teeth. She was completely outmatched by Zeed's physical strength. "What did we even do?! Let us go!"

"Sorry, but I can't let you get away right here." The man looked down at Riot with utter confidence. "Right now, hunting Blood Pact members is a lucrative business in the Shian territory. I wouldn't stand a chance in a fair fight... but an ambush was

effective after all. That kid's head is mine." The man nodded toward Justice. The boy was still being held in the demon dog's jaws.

Seeing Justice's face contorted with fear, Riot bared her fangs. "That kid isn't a Blood Oath member! It's some kind of mistake!"

"That's what I heard in the town of Ragn." Rachel stepped forward and picked up her whip. She tossed aside Riot's prosthetic arm and greatsword, testing the feel of her favorite weapon. "They said there was a Blood Alliance member posing as a Holy War Officer. His only partner was the Battle Armor Demon... Normally, I'd be too intimidated to even get near a Blood Alliance member... Right, Captain?"

"Yeah, I figured if it was just the two of them, I'd have a chance to nab them. So I got there first and set up an ambush. I figured if they were leaving Ragn's town, they'd have to come to this trading inn."

Riot looked up at Rachel's satisfied face.

"You're the one who's a Blood Alliance member! Using a mutant beast like that!"

"How rude! My Gustav isn't a mutant beast!" Rachel forcefully pulled Riot's chest toward her as she pinned him down. "Gustav is a poor child whose body has been corrupted by magic! And you call him a mutant beast! You vulgar Battle Armor Demon, I'll never forgive you!"

"You're the one who looks vulgar and lewd!"

"I've had enough! Gustav, finish him off!"

Turning around, Rachel lashed out with her whip. "Turn that brat into steak! Cook him until he's crispy and charred!"

"W-what?!" Justice let out a scream and looked behind him. The demon hound Gustav growled deeply, bringing his fangs close to the boy's face.

"Ri-Riot!"

"Stop it, stop it right now! Let him go, you idiot!" Riot struggled, but Zeed had completely pinned her down.

As Rachel and the mercenaries looked on, the demon dog Gustav opened his bright red mouth wide. Justice gripped his Holy War Staff tightly, cowering with his eyes closed.

"Justice! Run!" Just as that anguished cry echoed through the street…

"W-what's that…"

Justice's eyes flew open at the warm sensation. The demon dog Gustav purred as he gently licked the boy's cheek. He even rubbed his nose against it, as if seeking affection. "Hehe, that tickles… stop it…"

Justice cradled the dog's large head in his arms and stroked its gray fur. Gustav's bristling fur gradually lay flat, and the demon dog sat down right there.

"Riot... This dog is actually pretty cute."

“Riot… This dog’s actually pretty cute, you know.”
Ignoring the concern of those around him, Justice was playing with the demon dog.

Shaking with disbelief, Rachel slammed her whip against the ground again. “What are you doing, Gustav! He’s a Blood Pact member! He’s one of the mages who turned you into this! Do it! Finish him off!” But Gustav was already sprawled on the ground, even striking a pose of submission toward Justice.

“Huh, so your name is Gustav... hehe, good boy, good boy...” Justice was playing with the demon dog, a broad smile spreading across his face. Seeing this, the mercenaries carrying their spears stood there dumbfounded.

“No way, Gustav actually getting that attached to someone other than Rachel...”

In reality, Rachel herself was the one feeling the most bitter. Watching Justice and Gustav embrace, the female dog handler cracked the whip in her hand with a sharp snap. “G-Gustav, you...!” But at the sight of Justice’s smile, the mercenaries’ killing intent had vanished. Sensing this, Riot began to cackle triumphantly. “What do you think? Do you really think there’s a blood ally like that? You’re a better Battle Armor Demon than I am, aren’t you? There’s no way you wouldn’t know.”

“Tch, this is ridiculous.” Spitting out a stream of saliva, Zeed relaxed his grip. “I don’t know if the rumors are true or not... but it seems I’ve got the wrong person.”

“Captain! There’s no other pair of Holy Warriors and Armored Demons out there! It’s definitely these two!”

Riot stood up, brushed the sand off herself, and shot a glance at Rachel, who was screaming. “You’re the most stubborn one of them all. You’re even dumber than a dog.”

“What did you say! You useless mechanical woman!”

“Oh my, feeling feisty? Think you can beat me without your doggy?”

“Hey, Captain! Say something!”

“Don’t bother. It’s a waste of energy and time.” Ignoring Rachel, who was tugging at his sleeve, Zeed looked around with an exasperated expression.

Then, the residents began peeking out timidly through the cracks in their doorways. The Battle Armor Demon Zeed waved both hands and called out to the crowd. “Come on out, it’s over! Sorry for the trouble!” It seemed he had warned the residents about the ambush beforehand. As a wave of relief washed over the area, people from all over the inn began to emerge. Instantly, the inn returned to its normal state.

“We’re the ones who were inconvenienced the most. How are you going to make it up to us?” Riot turned to face Zeed. Zeed scratched the back of his neck, looking exasperated.

“I guess I have no choice. I’ll buy you a drink. Will that make it okay?”

“I don’t plan on forgiving you, but I’ll take a drink anyway.” Still flashing a murderous glare, Riot nodded reluctantly.

Behind them, Justice was still playfully wrestling with Gustav.

It was a truly strange and awkward encounter in the desert.

The group entered the largest tavern in the trading post of Negros. The hall-style first floor was lined with numerous tables, all of which were occupied by members of the Red Flame Raiding Corps. The unit was said to consist of twenty people.

Under the command of the captain, the Battle Armor Demon Zeed, there were ten spearmen, two grenadiers,, and four assault engineers.

Additionally, there was Rachel, the hound handler, serving as deputy commander, and Bulk, the heavily armored spearman who had closed in on Riot with his long spear, held the same rank.

"Well, it's a medium-sized mercenary unit, I suppose…" Riot tapped her finger rhythmically on the table as she looked around. "I've never heard of a unit that brings their families along to battle."

"That's us—the Red Flame Raiders." Grinning, Zeed also glanced at the other tables. There, the members' wives, children, and even younger siblings were waiting noisily for their meals.

A unit that fought while bringing their entire families along was something she'd never even seen in other regions. "I'm single myself... but if you fight long enough, some guys end up with wives. And once you have a wife, kids are next. I figured it's better to be together than to leave them behind in some town while I fight."

"Huh..." Riot was speechless at this unfamiliar way of thinking.

The children had already gathered around Justice. It seemed they'd never seen a Holy Warrior up close before. They stroked his white holy robes and showed interest in his holy staff.

"Hey, Lord Justice, do you use this to perform miracles?"

"That's right. Here, hold it."

"Wow, let me touch it too!"

"Don't fight. Come on, hold it steady." Acting every bit the big brother, Justice was playing with the children.

The mothers, too, were completely captivated by Justice's smile. Feeling at ease leaving their children in his care, they each set to work on their needlework and mending.

Beside them, the demon dog Gustav lay lazily sprawled out. It was a peaceful scene, hard to believe it was in a corner of the polluted desert.

"Would you look at that! He's just like a kid..." Rachel said, resting her chin on her hand on the table.

But at those words, Riot gave a short click of her tongue in response. "He's not just some kid. He's a Holy Crusader."

"Hmph, we'll see about that! There's a chance Gustav's being fooled, too!"

"Oh my, is your beloved dog really that dim-witted?"

"What did you say?! Get out of here!" Sitting across from each other at the same table, the two glared at one another, their noses almost touching.

Zeed leaned back in his chair, looking exhausted. "Cut it out, you're annoying. Look, our order's here."

"Sorry for the wait. Here's your cactus soda and bourbon, and a large beer and water."

"W-water?!" Before a dumbfounded Riot, the waitress set down a plain glass filled with nothing but water.

Zeed held up his glass of bourbon. "Anyway, it's our fault. I promised to buy you a drink, so have a glass."

"You're telling me to have a drink, but it's just plain water!"

“That’s right. Who said I’d buy you alcohol?”
“Normally, you’d think someone would treat you to something you like!”
“Why the hell should I do that for a complete stranger like you? Water’s free. Help yourself.”
“Are you out of your mind?! You cheapskate!”
“Oh, and we ordered some snacks too, but those are for us. We’re splitting the bill with you.” With that, he downed the drink in one gulp.
Stunned, Riot stared intently at Zeed from head to toe. “You’re a cheapskate—the very embodiment of stinginess. What kind of upbringing did your parents give you?”
“Unfortunately, my parents sold me to a slave trader.” Saying this with a straight face, Zeed rattled the ice in his glass. “I was driven out of the town where I was born because of magical pollution... I’ve been a refugee ever since I can remember. If I’d had money, my parents probably wouldn’t have sold me, but unfortunately, I had younger brothers and sisters, you see.” He casually brushed off his tragic circumstances and turned his gaze toward Riot as well. “Well, you’re a Battle Armor Demon too. We’ve both led pretty trashy lives, haven’t we?”
“It pains me to say that you're righy,” Riot brushed it off without changing her expression, though she wanted nothing more than to trample and burn her childhood memories to the ground.
“The captain isn’t stingy. He’s just financially savvy.” Sipping her cactus soda, Rachel nodded proudly. “Between the soldiers and our families, we have to feed nearly fifty people. We need to earn our bounties properly and distribute them to everyone. Right, Bulk?”
The giant she addressed was gulping down beer from a mug the size of a bucket. He downed it in one go without pausing for breath, smiled contentedly, and silently gestured for a refill. “You really are the quiet type, aren’t you...”
Beside an incredulous Rachel, Zeed laughed heartily. “There’s no such thing as wasted money, and I don’t do anything pointless. That’s my policy. I was actually happy when I caught you just now. After all, it only took seven percent of the energy I’d expected. Though I was happier when I found a five-dorc coin yesterday.”
“So you're saying we're worth less than pocket change!”
Sighing with exhaustion, Riot ordered a cactus soda for herself and shot Zeed a sidelong glare. “But for a cheapskate, you’ve got some nice gear. An electromagnetic knife, stun gloves… and what’s that technology that lets you hide yourself from the radar?”
“Thermal-optical stealth function… 'Stealth armor', you know.” Zeed pointed at his armor. “It has a function that projects a three-dimensional holographic screen around the wearer, displaying the background. That’s why it’s invisible to the naked eye. On top of that, it blocks heat dissipation and eliminates unnecessary noise.”
“Wait, that’s...”
“Ah, it’s super technology from the era of the Eight Continents — that is, before the ‘Ancient Catastrophe.’ I got it at an auction for excavated artifacts a while back - or three million dorc.”

“Three million dorc? Whoa!”

“That’s not all. I usually use that spear. Naturally, it’s made of the sacred metal Zodanium.” Zerd pointed to the wall of the tavern. Leaning against it was a magnificent polearm about 2.5 meters long - the tip alone must have been at least 50 centimeters. The deeply curved blade looked capable of not only slicing but also knocking an opponent down.

Riot was so stunned she nearly fainted. This was no equipment a private mercenary would possess.

But, paying no heed to her astonishment, Zeed took another sip of bourbon. “Yeah, both were expensive purchases, but they let me protect my squad and my family more effectively. When you think about the long run, it actually works out cheaper. I’m a man who spends when I need to.”

“You’re such a dependable captain.” Rachel smiled happily.

Riot projected the data from the fight earlier on with Zeed onto her retinas. Firepower, reflexes, overall strength… every single stat surpassed her own. She surmised that Zeed had likely invested a significant amount of money into his Battle Armor Demon capabilities as well. “So that’s why you targeted us for the bounty. What a nuisance.” Taking a sip of the cactus soda that had finally arrived, Riot swept her bangs back. “Besides, hunting Blood Pact members is reckless. They’re not opponents you can beat with physical attacks.”

“I know, but we've got our own reasons!” Rachel pouted slightly as she twirled the ends of her blonde hair between her fingers. “Mutant beasts have been appearing all over this area at an abnormal rate. Good thing that the bounties for them skyrocketed as a result, but it means we’ve got more competition, too.”

“Mutant beasts appearing at an abnormal rate...?”

“You didn’t know?” Zeed glanced sideways at Riot. “It’s a recent development. I don’t know what’s causing it, but… every town in southern Atlas is fighting them day and night. Even the White Pope, who oversees the Atlas region, has ordered the Holy Churches across the land to step up their extermination efforts. That said, the Holy Church can’t cover every little post town - that’s why small trading posts like this one hire mercenaries like us to take care of them.”

Riot recalled the events in the town of Ragn. It’s rare for a mutated beast like I-worms to appear in urban areas. Was that attack just another anomaly?

“We got the extermination fee on our own terms, but once word got out, mercenary units started coming on expeditions from all over. It’s not like we can just rake in the cash like we used to.”

Zeed nodded in agreement at Rachel’s words. “Sometimes you just have to push yourself to make a living. Now is one of those times.”

Riot glanced outside the shop. The howling sandstorm was growing stronger. Could it have something to do with the intense magical energy she sensed when they arrived at this post town?

(What on earth is going on…?) Just as she got lost in thought and took another sip of her cactus soda...

Suddenly, the shop door swung open. At the same moment, a gust of black wind blew into the room. Riot, Justice, and the mercenaries all turned their gaze toward the doorway at once.

There, with the sandstorm behind her, stood a single girl.

"..."

Riot instinctively reached for the pistol at her waist. Rachel also shifted her weight off her seat.

The girl had striking features that could even be described as masculine. Her short blonde hair was tied back, and her blue eyes shone brightly. Her white travel clothes were worn thin, telling the tale of a long journey. She was an extraordinary girl, radiating desperation from every pore.

“W-what on earth are you—” Justice, standing beside her, spoke to her gently.

But the girl scanned the interior of the shop with a vacant gaze and heaved a heavy sigh. “Ah, mercenaries... That's good...” Saying only that, she collapsed to her knees.

Justice rushed over in a panic and lifted her up. “Hey! Pull yourself together! Come on!"

Riot and Zeed also stood up and looked down at the girl in Justice’s arms. “A vagrant? Not exactly a rare sight, huh.”

“She looks like she’s got a story behind her...” As Riot spoke, the demon dog Gustav walked right past her. The gray beast nuzzled the girl’s face and began licking her dirty cheek.

“Hey, she's got a pretty jewel on her.” Rachel approached and pointed. A thin necklace hung around the girl’s neck, a small blue gem encrusted in it.

Justice’s eyes also fell on that gem. “This… Isn’t that a rare gem — an amethyst?!” The boy had realized something. But before he could explain, the girl slowly regained consciousness.

“...Ah, you’re... a Holy War Officer...!”

“I’m Justice - and yes, I'm a Holy Warrior. And you are...”

The girl cut Justice off, speechless. Relief and joy appeared on her face at the same time - but that sense of relief caused the girl to drift off once more.

“Hey, you! Pull yourself together, come on!”

“Justice, who is this girl?” Realizing he knew something, Riot pressed him for an answer.

Justice stopped calling out to the vagabond girl and looked around at the group. “This girl is a Purifier. She belongs to the Holy Church… she’s someone who exorcises and purifies magic…” Then, once more, he peered into the girl’s face. Justice muttered to himself, dazed. “But why is a Purifier here…” The boy let out a sigh along with a question no one could answer.

“She came all the way from the city of Dallas by herself?” Rachel was the first to feign exaggerated surprise.

But everyone felt the same way. The girl who had appeared claimed she had walked all the way from Dallas, a provincial city 200 kilometers to the south, all by herself. She had crossed scorching desert and polluted sandstorms.

“It’s thanks to this amethyst...” The girl, laid on a sofa in the tavern, had finally regained consciousness and was sitting up. She took another sip of chilled Shiron tea and

lifted the necklace around her neck. “It repels magical energy from the atmosphere and purifies the air. All of us Purifiers carry one as proof of our status...”

Just as Holy Warriors use the rare gem Metalite to perform miracles, Purifiers are those who perform pseudo-healing miracles using the rare gemstone Amethyst - Rare Gemstone Healing, which treats physical injuries; Rare Gemstone Sedation, which calms mental turmoil; and the ability held in highest regard - Magic Removal.

Though they possess no offensive abilities, they draw upon the power of the rare gemstone Amethyst to perform these three pseudo-healing miracles, making them figures akin to quasi-Holy Warriors.

Around the sofa, the mercenaries had gathered in a crowd, looking on with curiosity.

Justice stood right beside the girl, watching her face with concern. “But is the situation in Dallas really that serious?”

“Yes. Mutant beasts have been attacking frequently for the past few weeks. Nothing like this has ever happened before... Our five Holy Knights have all been slain…”

“Even the Holy Knights couldn’t handle them?” Riot tilted her head as she sipped her actus soda.

Holy Knights are warriors specialized in fighting Evil Spirits, armed with weapons made out of the holy steel Zodanium. It’s hard to imagine them falling to mere mutant beasts - animals that have become ferocious due to magical contamination. If what she's saying is true...

“The mutant beasts must have been exposed to a high concentration of magical energy over a long period of time.” Leaning back in his chair, Zeed tilted his glass of bourbon. “So, you came here to ask for help to protect the town?”

“Yes… I thought I’d find someone if I went as far as the trading post… but the other posts were no good. There were no units I could ask for help. Finally, here at the third one… I met all of you…” The girl turned to face Justice with renewed earnestness. “Please, come to Dallas! Everyone there lives in constant fear of daily raids! Please, exterminate the mutant beasts! I’ll pay you!”

Justice nodded at the girl with a gentle smile. “I understand. I’ll go with you. I’ll do whatever I can.”

“Really?! You, a Holy Crusader, will really...!”

“But you don’t need to pay me.” The blond boy placed his hand on his chest and continued in a quiet tone. “I am a Pilgrim Holy Crusader. If there are people in trouble, it is my mission to go and help them.”

“But…”

“Don’t worry about it. I just want to help.”

The girl was clearly shaken by the sudden offer. But there was no lie in Justice’s eyes. Seeing the glow in those innocent eyes, she couldn’t help but choke back a sob. “Thank you... thank you, Lord Justice...”

Riot, however, looked down at the floor with a look of dissatisfaction. (Justice would say something like that... as usual... But staying in the Cheyenne territory like this... Not wise.) They’d managed to fool Zeed and the others, but there was no guarantee that a mercenary unit wouldn’t show up later, having heard the rumors and set their sights on the two of them. This was a place they should have passed through

quickly. That said, it was nearly impossible to overturn Justice's decision once it had been made. Feeling frustrated, Riot looked down at her partner. "Um… hey, Jus…"

"You're not seriously planning to take this on for free, are you, Riot?" Suddenly, Zeed threw out an unexpected question. "No way, right? You used to be known as a notorious mercenary. You wouldn't be such a softie as to take on a mutant beast hunt for free, would you?"

Riot shot a sharp glance at Zeed. Zeed met her gaze. Justice and the girl could also sense the tense atmosphere that had settled between the two.

"I-Is that really true...?"

"It's true, sis. Riot here is a woman who used to make a fortune off mutant beast exterminations. She'd say she'd take the job for free, then send a massive bill later. That's the kind of woman she is." Hearing this from Zeed, the girl looked straight up at Riot.

Rachel and the other mercenaries all shared a cold, piercing gaze.

The red-haired warrior in armor lowered her eyes. She had no intention of arguing with Zeed's words.

(It's true... I used to be like that...)

Before meeting Justice, Riot had made a living as an independent mercenary. She belonged to no mercenary unit, traveling the New Continent all by herself. When her funds were running low, she had even charged fees far exceeding the market rate - but that was so she could survive on her own.

(If I belonged to a mercenary unit, I might have to lend a hand in conflicts between cities just for the money... That's why... I only engaged in monster hunts that I felt were justifiable.) But there were times when that alone wasn't enough to make a living. Maintaining the Battle Armor Demon's functions required a considerable amount of funds. (I had no choice if I wanted to survive... I don't think that single sentence would be enough to make it okay. I don't intend to say it out loud.) Still...

"...Riot is kind." Suddenly, Justice spoke up. "Riot, you've been traveling with me for two whole years now - you've helped so many people already. You'll come with me this time, too, right?" Justice turned to look at Riot with a beaming smile. She couldn't bring herself to reply. Her thoughts were stuck in the back of her throat, and the words wouldn't come out. "...It's just... business as usual, you know..."

"Whoa, whoa, are you serious?" At Riot's words, Zeed sat up in a panic. "Taking on a job to hunt mutant beasts for free is nothing short of business sabotage. How about it, lady? Want to hire the twenty of us? We're pretty skilled."

"Would... you actually come?"

"As long as you pay us, sure. Per person... let's say... 100,000 dorc. How's that?"

"100,000 dorcs per person! That's three times the market rate..."

"Yeah, three times. But it's not too high. We're talking about taking down a mutant beast invasion the Holy Knights can't handle. It's only fair to include a hazard bonus. Plus, there's this crazy sandstorm going on." Zeed took a swig of bourbon and pointed outside the bar with his thumb. "The magical radiation levels in the air are

way higher than in other areas - there's also a chance this abnormal situation could get worse. Any other mercenary unit would back out and refuse the job."

Neither Rachel nor Bulk said a word to the mercenaries lined up before them. They had left the negotiations entirely up to Zeed. The girl clenched her fists and fell silent.

Riot glared at Zeed with a fierce glare, but Zeed just grinned and peered into the girl's face.

"You can't count on Riot. For that price, we'll take care of everything until the battle is over. We can do it. How about it? Two million dorc in total." Zeed knew. He knew the girl had been turned down by other units countless times and that she didn't have the strength left to go looking for another unit. He could see right through her — he knew she'd pay, even if he jacked up the price a bit.

It was exactly the way a mercenary… the way the Riot, too, used to operate.

"I only have 100,000 dorc on me right now… but once we get to Dallas, I'll definitely pay you the rest…"

"100,000, huh… Not bad, but it's too little. How about I take that as a down payment?" Zeed pointed at the girl's chest.

Instantly, the girl clutched her necklace.

"I can't give you the amethyst! I'm holding this in trust for the Holy Church! It's not my personal property!"

"I see... Well then, how about that ring? It looks like quite a fine piece." Zeed shifted his gaze. A small but vividly colored ruby ring sat on the girl's finger.

"This..." The girl stammered, staring at her own finger. It was obvious at a glance that it was a cherished item.

Riot couldn't suppress the sickening feeling rising in her chest. First, he demands an item she would absolutely never part with. Then, immediately after being refused, he names the item he really wants. It takes courage for the client to refuse twice. She likely fears that if she refuses to hand it over, the entire request will be canceled. Zeed's tactics were far too cunning.

"Zeed, you…"

"...All right, I'll give it to you." As if to cut her thoughts short, the girl slipped the ring off her finger. Handing it to Zeed without hesitation, she fixed the mercenary captain with a stern gaze. "In exchange, this… is our contract. Please put what you just said in writing later."

Riot was taken aback by the unexpectedly fierce intensity in the girl's eyes. Not only Riot, but Justice, Rachel, and the mercenaries all let out gasps of admiration. No matter what happens, the girl wants to achieve her goal: that conviction was evident on the girl's face. No wonder she had made it this far on her own.

"Ah, no problem. You got yourself a real bargain." Zeed tucked the ring into his breast pocket and shifted his gaze to Justice. "So… the young Holy War Office is coming along too, I presume?"

"Of course. I can't just leave them behind."

"I see. By the way, can you use healing miracles?"

"Of course," Justice replied, nodding.

"One low-level healing miracle and one mid-level healing miracle…"

“That’d be great. If anyone gets hurt, I’ll count on you to treat them. Medical supplies aren’t cheap, you know.”

“You’re going a bit far there…” Riot started to say, but trailed off. She wasn’t the kind of person who could criticize Zeed. Realizing this, she clicked her tongue in frustration.

Perhaps relieved that the business deal had been settled, Zeed let out a huge yawn. “Well, it’s getting late, so let’s set out tomorrow morning. Let’s get some rest.”

“You should rest too. You must be tired...” Justice draped a sheet over the girl lying on the sofa.

The girl looked somewhat relieved and smiled at Justice. “Thank you so much...”
“It’s fine... Oh, and I almost forgot.” Justice asked the girl with a carefree expression. “Would you mind telling me your name? I haven’t asked yet.”
“I’m Ilsie... Purification Officer Ilsie...”
And so, a long journey began.

【Chapter 2: Dallas / The Deadly Blade】

That darkness was indeed pulsating.
The countless cells forming its surroundings breathed as if gasping for air, slowly and repeatedly dividing. Flickering arteries ran crisscrossing through the area, and pitch-black bodily fluids flowed back and forth from time to time. Body tissues that should have decayed long ago were attempting to regenerate over the course of a long time. Feeding solely on hatred and vengeance toward humanity...
"N-Gazei... N-Ga-Olog.....Iri-Iri, Olog-Zei..." Voices writhing in agony echoed through the vast darkness.
In response to that cry, two thoughts emerged, as if weaving through the darkness. "Why are you in such a hurry, my Lord...!" The man’s thoughts asked, sounding irritated. "The dimensional gate has already been opened. All that remains is to wait for time to pass... Have I not already given you everything you have ever desired!"
"Watch your tongue, Gates." The woman’s thoughts mocked him coldly. “We exist because of you, my Lord. If you desire it, we will offer any sacrifice. Moreover, the resurrection is imminent. Is complaining not tantamount to breaking our eternal Blood Oath?”
“I hate that smug grin of yours, Iglia!” The man’s thoughts spat out the words. "Even you, Master, know how much I have sacrificed for this Blood Pact! It is a clear fact that I have contributed far more than you, ritualist! Surely you can overlook a little grumbling!"
"But if interference occurs, all our efforts thus far will be for naught..." The woman’s thoughts remained calm as she sharpened her vision. "That is precisely what the Lord fears..."
As if in response, the darkness rumbled.
At the same moment, a white sphere materialized before the two minds. The faintly glowing sphere had a smooth surface and no distinguishing features. Suddenly, a clear image appeared on its surface. It was a blond-haired boy facing off against a Demon God.
“Who is he... this brat? A Holy Warrior?”
“...They say his name is Justice...”
“Then that means...!”
The woman met the man’s astonishment with a cold sneer. “To say he is no ordinary Holy Warrior does not mean he has reached that level yet... But...”
“So he’s an enemy we must be wary of...”
“That’s right. And he's already closing in on us...”
The image eventually faded, and the sphere scattered into darkness.

Once again, the darkness transformed its uncontrollable ferocity into a groan. “Nga-Zei... N-Gaolog... Iriri, Olog Zei..."

The woman’s thoughts, as always, turned to profound deliberation. "Barely thirteen years old… and yet he has slaughtered many Blood Sworn and Evil Spirits across the continent…”

"With him looking like that, it wouldn’t be strange if they let their guard down."

"No, our comrades cannot be that incompetent. That would mean too many of them have let their guard down." Even so, the woman’s thoughts flashed a smile of confidence. "But he, too, has not noticed our scheme. No, he likely doesn’t even know of our existence..."

"So what are we going to do?"

"Nothing. We’ll just wait for time to pass. Just as you said..." Mocking the man’s question, the woman gazed out into the darkness. "When time passes, the Master will be resurrected in this world. Seven days until the ritual ends... By then, no one — not even HIM — will be able to do anything. Unless, of course, we could turn back time..."

"A foolish plan. That would be too boring." The man’s thoughts radiated a fierce fighting spirit. "If that one is the one who bears that fate... it would be best to defeat him now."

"Have you lost your mind, Gates? There’s no need to invite him here."

“That’s what you think, Iglia. Look at the bigger picture. Steel must be broken before it becomes a sword.” The man’s thoughts, as if resolved, turned away. “That one has only one head. I’ll take it down before you get the chance to hunt him down.” At that thought, the man’s smile seeped with desire. “Dominion over this land… my master will surely entrust it to me…!”

"Come back, Gates! Gates!"

The man’s thoughts vanished into thin air.

All that remained was the darkness, breathing in and out.

“You mean there’s no drinking water?!”

“Yeah, that seems to be the case.” Riot shrugged slightly at Zeed’s outcry. “It’s supposed to be the biggest oasis on the route to Dallas City, though.”

Amid the howling black wind, the two looked up at the facility before them.

The concrete structure, nearly twenty meters tall, was cylindrical. It was the Shiva Oasis, one of the unmanned water supply facilities scattered across the Zoana Desert. It was supposed to pump groundwater from a deep aquifer and provide purified water free of charge to travelers. But...

“Look at this.” Riot had already drawn groundwater from the row of faucets. The water stored in the plastic containers was so murky it was clearly visible to the naked eye. The rod-shaped magic detector she had inserted was also indicating dangerous levels. “It’s way too abnormal for the water source here to be contaminated like this.”

“You’re right. The closer we get to Dallas, the higher the magic radiation levels in the air are getting, too...”

Riot gazed toward the horizon. They were still nearly 100 kilometers from their destination. “It can’t be helped. We’ll just have to head straight to Dallas with only the distilled water we have now.”

“The magical contamination in Dallas is bound to be even worse... Ilsie!” Zeed turned around and addressed the client by her first name. “Once we get to Dallas, we’ll be able to secure drinking water, right?”

“Don’t worry about that. The Holy Church should have it covered.” Walking across the sandy ground, Exorcist Ilsie nodded. “Of course, the groundwater in Dallas has also been getting more contaminated, but the Holy Church’s water purification facilities there are highly advanced. They’re imbued with a purification miracle, so they can remove the magic too.”

“That’s good to hear… but damn it! I hate having to use the water we’ve got on hand. It’s such a waste.”

“What can you do? We can’t be stingy about water too.” As Riot spoke, the three of them set down their empty water tanks and returned to the vehicle.

There, four massive armed trucks were lined up in a row. The heavily armored tractor section alone was as large as a two-story house. Attached to the rear were sixteen-wheeled trailers. The upper sections of the trailers were equipped with two rotating turrets, one at the front and one at the rear. The front turret housed the main armament: an 88mm anti-aircraft gun capable of firing anti-tank armor-piercing rounds. The rear turret was a quadruple 20mm automatic suppression gun. Both were surrounded by sturdy armor shields.

The four trucks, painted entirely in desert camouflage, were all owned by Zeed. While they looked identical on the outside, one was for combat and equipment transport, and two were for family living quarters. The interiors of each were vastly different.

The three returned to one of the family living quarters. Inside the truck, a comfortable air purification system was running. The cool interior was divided into small rooms. Passing through a narrow passageway, Riot returned to the room known as the living room.

“W-welcome back, Riot!” The moment he stepped inside, Justice’s pitiful scream rang out. “Help me! M-my snacks—”

It was such a homey place that the harsh scenery outside seemed like a lie.

The living room was carpeted, with countless colorful cushions scattered about. Amidst that mountain of cushions, Justice was surrounded by children - those who had already finished looting were clutching candies and chocolates.

“Wow, there’s even a Red Niroi cream puff! I love these!”

“Ah, you can’t have that! I was saving that for myself...!”

“This is delicious! Thank you, Lord Justice!”

“Wow, they’ve already eaten it all! Gustav, help me! Gustav!”

But the giant demon dog sprawled out beside him acted as if he hadn’t heard a thing.

Ilsie chuckled and sat down.

Riot, exasperated, sank into the soft sofa. “Relax, at least you won't be getting diabetes any time soon.”

“The Holy War Officer sure is carefree.” Zeed snorted and roughly snatched the intercom. “Bulk, let’s go. We won't stop until we reach Dallas!” He gave the order to the driver’s seat. Bulk, in the driver’s seat, started the vehicle without a word.

The stable chassis didn’t shake much, and there was little noise. The journey was nothing short of comfortable.

“Still, this is quite a luxurious trailer, isn’t it? I’m impressed.” Riot looked around the living room once more. The amenities rivaled those of any mansion. At the back of the living room, there was even a kitchen. The walls were covered with drawings made by children. It was the very picture of a clean, happy home.

“It’s because we have this trailer that everyone feels at ease.” As she spoke, Rachel appeared from the kitchen. She poured drinks into cups and set them on the table. The Houndmaster took a sip of her cactus soda. “Usually, mercenaries who start families end up going away to work. But no matter what town you leave your family in, you can’t feel at ease. After all, this is…”

“The New Continent, right?” Riot pulled her cactus soda closer and took a sip from her glass.

“There’s no such thing as a safe town, after all. In that regard, this trailer’s got us covered. It’s not built to be taken down by just any old skirmish.”

The Battle Armor Demon tapped the interior wall to test its strength. “It must’ve cost you a pretty penny to assemble a fleet of trucks like this, right? Maintenance costs must be high too... You’re not just being cheap, are you?”

“Of course. But I’m charging you for the transport fee.” Zeed pointed his finger and declared. “You’d be making a huge mistake if you thought you could ride on my trailer for free.”

Riot was speechless. The armored buggies were loaded onto the equipment transport trailer bringing up the rear. “Hey! In exchange for the ride, we provided fuel and distilled water! It was written right there in our contract with you!”

“Ah, that’s right. I have a nasty habit of forgetting things that don’t suit me…”

“After making me sign all those detailed, nitpicky clauses!”

Zeed remained silent, his smile lingering.

The mercenary captain had made Riot sign countless documents in minute detail - the contract for transporting Riot and Justice to Dallas; the issue of command authority in Dallas; the deed of assignment granting the right to transfer any compensation received from the city of Dallas to Zeed and his team - here was even a contract allowing them to freely harvest parts from Riot’s body in the event of her death.

“Well, I guess that’s how I can afford a car like this.”

“Oh, right, speaking of contracts, Ilsie.” Zeed shifted his gaze and turned back to the young girl who had commissioned them. “Please make sure to include compensation in case we can’t restock distilled water in Dallas. Water is essential for our family’s survival and for maintaining the truck.”

“Certainly. Just have it drawn up in a contract later…” Ilsie nodded at the mercenary captain with a look of familiarity. Naturally, she, too, was asked to sign various documents. Nearly twice as many as Riot’s. Ilsie had responsibly agreed to all of them.

“Are you really okay with this, Ilsie…?” Unable to stand by and watch, Riot asked. “You don’t have to do whatever this guy says. If there’s something you want to refuse, you should just say no.”

“Hey, hey, don’t interfere with the contract. This is a formal…”

But after glaring at Zeed for a moment, Riot continued to reason with her in a calm voice. “It’s true. You’re the client, after all. You’re allowed to make demands.”

“Yes, thank you. But...” With a faint smile, Ilsie let out a sigh. “Finding another unit equipped with this much gear again would be impossible...”

“Well, that’s true.” Riot’s nod wasn’t about the living room. The trailer carrying the armored buggies was packed with a considerable amount of heavy equipment. Various anti-ground and anti-air guided missiles, small multi-barrel rocket launchers, unmanned reconnaissance drones equipped with video cameras, fully automatic landmine launchers... Weapons that made one think, “They’ve got even this?” were packed in so tightly there was barely any room left. Ammunition was plentiful as well.

Rachel whistled in admiration of Ilsie's cool-headed judgment. “It’s a smart move, but you’re really patient to go along with our captain’s demands, aren’t you?”

“Is… that so?”

“Contracts often fall through at the last minute. It’s not like all clients are rich.”

Even so, Ilsie's eyes burned with a strong resolve. “I have no one else to rely on but you. So...”

“Hmm, you’re certainly an odd one.” Saying this with a look of exasperation, Rachel downed her cactus soda in one gulp.

Glancing sideways at the silent girl, Riot stroked the nape of her neck.

Ilsie's fatigue had recovered considerably. Her once sallow skin had regained its pallor, and color had returned to her cheeks. Perhaps due to the sense of accomplishment from completing the mission, she had even begun to smile.

Riot wanted to somehow return that smile. “Well, since she’s counting on you, do your best, Rachel.” Riot patted the hound handler on the shoulder. “You’d better work hard enough to earn the fee you were paid, you hear?”

“What’s with you? You sound like you’re lecturing me! And you’re younger than me, too!” Rachel scowled and snapped back. “You two shouldn’t be slacking off just because you’re working for free! Fight until you drop from overwork!”

“Yeah, yeah, sure thing, Auntie Rachel the Crazy Dog Lady.”

“Who you calling auntie?!” Riot and Rachel grabbed each other by the collar in front of the stunned children.

Rachel turned to Zeed and bared her fangs furiously. “Hey, Captain! I’m the only woman in the Red Flame Raiders, and I’m being insulted like this! Say something to this machine woman!”

“Ah, I’m not stupid enough to get involved in a fight between women. Do whatever you want.” Zeed deliberately looked away, pretending to be engrossed in his contract with Ilsie.

Riot, too, shot a fierce glare at Justice, who stood there dumbfounded. “What do you think, Justice? I’m way more mature and a much better woman than this girl who looks like she belongs in some seedy dive bar, don’t you think?”

“Uh, well, I don’t know about that…”

Exchanging glances with Ilsie, the blond boy gave a broad smile. “But you two do look alike. It’s like there are two Riots here.”

“What did you say?!”

Ignoring the two of them screaming in unison, Zeed hurriedly finished writing up the paperwork. “Alright, Ilsie, just sign here.”

“Understood…”

“It’s safest to put the agreement in writing. I don’t want any arguments later on.”

Justice stared at Zeed curiously as he spoke. “Mr. Zeed, you’re such a worrier, aren’t you?”

“That’s the first time anyone’s ever said that to me. But that’s not it. If I were really a worrier, I wouldn’t have let you ride in this car.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don't trust you just yet.”

At those cold, hard words, Riot and Rachel also froze in their tracks.

Ilsie, not understanding the reason, looked back and forth between Zeed and Justice in bewilderment.

But undeterred, Zeed continued. “I think the rumors from the city of Ragn are true. The ones about a Blood Sworn posing as Holy War Officer lurking around...”

“Surely you don't mean Lord Justice...”

“Yeah, I suspect him. But what can you do?”

As Ilsie tried to speak up, Zeed flashed a sly smile.

“They say that Holy Crusader is traveling with a Battle Armor Demon.”

“..." Ilsie’s throat tightened. Zeed glanced at Riot.

Rachel looked at Riot once more and released the tension from her hand clutching her chest.

“Come to think of it, that’s right...” Rachel, her disgust plain to see, pulled away from Riott.

A tense atmosphere filled the living room. But...

“I am... a Crusader.” Justice stated it clearly. “You won’t believe me just because I say it... but it’s not a lie.”

“I hope so. I don’t like standing shoulder to shoulder with a Blood Pact member either.” Without even meeting Justice’s direct gaze, Zeed shrugged. “Well, you’ll find out eventually - but I’m not such a softie that I’ll forgive you if you try to fool me.” The mercenary captain’s gaze turned toward Riot. Ilsie also turned to face the Battle Armor Demon.

But Riot didn’t respond. Explaining it with words would be futile.

(I’ll just have to show it through my actions... Justice, you are... a Holy War Officer)

She clenched both fists as if to infuse them with his resolve.

Justice turned to look at his partner. The boy nodded with his usual smile. Riot, too, silently nodded.

Their feelings were unwavering.

As they headed south, the sandstorm grew more vicious. The convoy of trucks carrying Riot and the others lost speed and lost their way numerous times. Even so, it was the afternoon of the third day since they had departed from the trading post of Negros.

“This has to be some kind of bad joke, man…” As Zeed groaned, the mercenaries who had stepped outside the vehicle were all equally speechless.

They had indeed arrived at the outer wall of the provincial city of Dallas. To ward off sandstorms and attacks by mutated beasts, the circular city was surrounded by a high stone wall. The cityscape, home to a population of about ten thousand, should have been hidden from view by the wall - but one entire section of the outer wall had been brutally breached.

Forced down from above, the wall’s debris lay scattered both inside and outside the city. Black sand blown in through the breach had surged all the way into the streets. And right before their eyes...

“It really is a bad joke...” Riot stepped down from the trailer and muttered.

A pitch-black mound sat in the middle of the street. Its bumpy shell spanned at least twenty meters across. From beneath that shell, nearly ten jointed legs jutted out in all directions. At the tips of those legs, sharp claws still gleamed.

“It’s a Bazam mutant beast - but usually they don't get this big...” Zeed ran over and thoroughly inspected the mutant beast’s corpse. The mercenaries hurriedly followed suit.

Bazams are mutant beasts which lurk in the sand dunes – they can be found all throughout the Zoana Desert. However, their average size is around three meters in length. Everyone sensed something was amiss with this corpse, which was roughly six times that size.

“Look, they took it down by firing general-purpose missiles at it. Seven of them... no, eight.” Seeing the impact marks, Rachel was stunned as well. This wasn’t supposed to be an enemy that would give them such a hard time.

The demon hound Gustav bristled his gray fur and began to growl fiercely.

Bulk’s silence was nothing out of the ordinary, but the mercenaries were holding their breath at the strangeness of the situation.

“A mutant beast this big... just how much magical energy did it absorb...?”

Beside Justice, who was tilting his head in confusion, Ilsie gazed blankly out at her hometown.

The townscape was nearly half-destroyed. There must have been numerous attacks by mutant beasts. Burned-out houses. Collapsed shops. There were even whole streets buried in rubble.

Rachel cast a concerned glance at Ilsie, who stood frozen in place. “It looks like the town took quite a beating while you were away.”

“T-the church…!”

“Ah, Ilsie! Don’t run off on your own!” Justice chased after the young Exorcist as she dashed off. Gustav followed close behind.

“Justice, where are you going!”

“Hey, Gustav, wait up!” Riot and Rachel also scrambled over the rubble and turned right onto the wide street.

The street led to a circular plaza at the end. With a collapsed fountain at its center, an old cathedral stood on the left. In front of the cathedral, a shanty town had been set up, and hundreds of citizens had gathered there - the injured were being carried in, and medical officers in white coats were guiding them into the church. Among them...

“Father Marshall!” Ilsie ran forward and threw herself into the arms of the middle-aged priest.

At the sound of her voice and the sight of her, a murmur—almost a shout—rose from the crowd.

“Ilsie! Is it really you, Ilsie?!”

“You’re back! I’m so glad!”

Everyone embraced Ilsie and patted her on the back.

The gentle-looking priest, wearing round-framed glasses, held the girl close and shed tears. “I was worried about you, Ilsie. And I also felt a little regret.”

“Father, I...”

“Sending you alone into the Desert of Death... I... I... He took off his glasses and wiped away his tears with his sleeve.

Ilsie sobbed so hard she began to choke, then finally turned around. “Father, I brought with me... a mercenary unit. And... a Holy War Officer...”

“A Holy War Officer...!”

Father Marshall’s gaze, the citizens’ gazes—all turned toward Justice at once. A chorus of admiration rose for the blond-haired boy clutching the Holy War Staff. Everyone formed the Holy Seal and bowed. Justice returned the gesture, forming the Holy Seal himself, and bowed deeply in return.

Riot and Rachel simply watched the scene in silence for a moment.

“Nothing like this has ever happened before...” Father Marshall sat down on a church pew and began to speak. “Clearly, the concentration of magical energy in the atmosphere has increased. This has accelerated the growth of the mutations and brought about further abnormalities. They are now on par with a low-rank evil spirit — a force so great they can no longer even be called mutant beasts.”

“There’s no way just five Holy Knights can handle this.” Recalling the corpse of the mutant beast Bazam from earlier, Riot clicked her tongue. “But are the attacks really that frequent…?”

“No, most of the casualties are victims of magical contamination.” The priest cast a sympathetic glance at the moaning citizens.

The church was old, but its interior was spacious. The area normally known as the Great Chapel had had its pews removed and had been converted into a makeshift hospital.

“The magic-laden wind is eroding the city walls and buildings. We weren’t particularly concerned at first, but… over the past week, the contamination levels have worsened drastically. That’s why…” At the end of his gaze stood Ilsie.

The young Exorcist knelt among the patients, biting her lip the entire time.
Glancing over, Riot saw her clutching a rare amethyst in her right hand and holding a woman's hand tightly in her left. The holy light emitted by the amethyst flowed through Ilsie's body and into the patient. It was the rare gemstone healing permitted only to Purification Priests.
"How are you feeling, Mom…?"
"Ah, I feel much better, Ilsie..." The emaciated woman lay on her back, exhaling a sigh of relief. "I thought you weren't coming back… I'm so glad you're here…"
"Of course. I won't leave you alone, mom..." Ilsie started to speak, but then swallowed her words.
Even from a distance, Riot could tell she was holding back tears.
Rachel sighed as she stroked Gustav, who was standing by her side. "So that child had a mother after all..."
"Yes, her father passed away long ago... She's my only remaining blood relative." Father Marshall let the tears flow once more. "She's a brave girl. Unable to bear seeing everyone die, she said she'd go get reinforcements on her own and set off. And she really did it... But…" The priest's voice caught in his throat. "...Ilsie is one unlucky child."
Riot let out a silent sigh. Even for a native of the Zoana Desert, traversing 200 kilometers of sand alone is simply too grueling. Yet, driven solely by her desire to save everyone, she made it all the way to the Negros inn. In the face of that conviction, the conditions Zeed had laid out might have seemed trivial.
"As for medical supplies..."
"Yes, we're completely out. Zeed provided us with some but it's nowhere near enough..."
There's no way any would be enough. There were easily hundreds of patients here alone. And this isn't even a disease that can be treated with simple medicine. The magical threads that have penetrated the skin are eating away at their bodies from the inside. They're simply heading toward a slow death.
"Second Strike..." Along with a quiet chant, a blue light ignited on the Holy War Staff. "Sacred Light Healing Array..."
A gasp of surprise escaped from the crowd. A healing miracle flowed from Justice's hands as a pale blue light. It was a more powerful holy light, clearly distinct from Ilsie's pseudo-healing miracle - the little girl bathed in that light instantly regained warmth in her cheeks.
"Ah, Shira...!"
"She'll be fine now. The healing will come into effect soon." Releasing the holy seal, Justice smiled at the mother. "But I'm worried about secondary infection. Please avoid going outside and stay underground as much as possible."
"Thank you, Holy Officer! Thank you so much!" The mother, holding her daughter, thanked him with tears streaming down her face.
The medical officers also looked relieved as they bowed their heads to Justice:
"Please allow us to express our gratitude as well, Lord Justice."
"Thank you. We'll be counting on you again tomorrow."
"You truly are a miracle-worker… If you're tired, please take a little rest."

“Yes,” Justice replied, rising from among the patients. “I’ll be back later. Just being bathed in the light of the Metalite attached to the Holy War Staff should make you feel quite a bit better.” Smiling cheerfully, Justice walked deep into the old Holy Church. His steps were light and he bore the usual smile on his face.

But Riot sensed something wrong about his demeanor and stood up. “Justice…” Calling out to him, she stepped into the dark small chapel.

The walls of the deserted chapel were adorned with stained glass, and a statue of Aeolus, the God of Creation, stood at the front. Facing that statue, Justice’s back was trembling.

“Justice, you…”

He was crying, stifling his voice.

Noticing this, Riot quietly approached his partner’s back. “You didn’t use your third miracle, did you...”

“I want to use it... I want to use it right now...” Sniffling, Justice said this. “There are so many people who won’t make it until tomorrow morning... I want to save them right now. If only I could, I would...” Having said that, he turned around. Justice looked up at Riot and continued. “If I use my final miracle now... I’ll get kicked out of here again... and then I won’t be able to heal anyone tomorrow...”

“Abandon one person today... save two tomorrow. I guess there’s no helping it.”

“Yeah, I guess so... I guess so, but... why am I... I...” Justice acutely felt his own powerlessness and was agonizing over his fate. He knew that the people of Dallas, losing their loved ones one after another, were suffering even more. He should have known this wasn’t a time for him to be shedding tears. Yet, tears of frustration still fell.

Riot wrapped her arms around her partner and pulled him close to her chest. “You’re doing everything you can. That’s enough.” She held the small boy’s body close, as if to envelop him. “Tomorrow we’ll save two, the day after tomorrow - another two, and the day after that two more. That’s all we can do.”

“Yeah… yeah…”

“No one else can do it. Only you can. So then...”

“I get it,” Justice said, pulling away from Riot. “The fact that I can do so it in the first place - for that alone, I have to thank the Creator God...”

“Now that's my Holy Warrior.” Riot smiled and gave him a wink.

Justice wiped away his tears and put on a brave smile.

The two stood side by side, gazing silently up at the divine statue for a moment. And unaware to them, through the eyes of the statue...

"Kindness, huh..." Far beyond the dimensional barrier, the man’s thoughts sneered. "An ideology of the weak and the poor. Mutual aid, my ass..." Looking down at Justice and Riot below, he could not suppress the rising tide of battle fervor within him Then he shifted his gaze.

He surveyed the city of Dallas from the sky, then zoomed in once more.

Around the outer walls, mercenaries were busily preparing their defenses.

“Bulk, have you laid all the anti-personnel mines? Finish it in an hour!” The Battle Armor Demon Zeed, issuing orders to his subordinates, was energetically running around the camp. “Hurry up and dig those trenches — they’ll be buried the moment the sandstorm hits! The anti-aircraft gun emplacement is on the right!”

"More childish tricks. A piece of cake to break through..." Suppressing a laugh, Gates exhaled deeply. "Preparing for a mutant beast attack is pointless. You won’t be fighting that kind of battle anymore. What you’re about to witness is best described as... a tragedy.”

But just then, the dimension began to tremble violently. "So you were here, Gates. I’ve been looking for you." The woman’s thoughts forced their way into the pulsating space. "You’re not actually going to come out to fight, are you?"

"That’s exactly what I’m going to do – and I won’t let you interfere, Iglia. "The man’s thoughts surveyed the city of Dallas with composure. "I have a good strategy to take them down. They won’t be able to resist my magic."

“Restrain yourself, Gates. That will expose our plan to them.” The woman’s thoughts closed in, as if to seize him. “If you use that magic, it’s like announcing Lord Olog Zei’s resurrection to them.”

“So what? Even if they know, there’s nothing they can do.” Unable to suppress a loud laugh, the man’s thoughts were filled with ecstasy. "Even if our plans are exposed, all that matters is that the Holy War Officer dies. I'll make sure he does."

"And what if you can’t?"

"Life’s a gamble. Win or lose."

"But you’ll be gambling our whole operation!"

But the man’s thoughts brushed aside the woman’s. "That kid cares for others... He’s full of love compassion... They’re tough, those kinds of guys." But the man’s thoughts flashed a cunning smile. "But on the flip side, he's not fit for combat. The stronger the goodness in their heart, the more they become a hindrance on the battlefield... That’s where his weakness lies." The man fixed his gaze on Justice once more. "Or do you loathe the thought of ME being the one to take him down, Iglia? I refuse to share the glory." Observing his prey, the man licked his lips repeatedly. "If I take his head, I’ll be the ruler of this land. If anyone interferes, I’ll strike them down — even if they’re on my side!"

"Gates, don’t be so hasty!"

But his thoughts swelled suddenly, engulfing the city of Dallas. No one yet knew that space-time had warped and trembled as if in a fit.

“Ilsie, why don’t you get some rest?” Father Marshall asked in a gentle voice. “You’ve been working nonstop since we returned to town today. You must be quite tired, aren’t you?”

“No, not really...” Saying this, Ilsie looked around. “There are quite a few people here who are seriously ill. I’ll be staying here tonight, so...”

It was already nearly midnight. The chill of the Zoana Desert, which had grown bitterly cold, was blowing relentlessly into the streets of Dallas.

“My mother is here too, so please don’t worry.”

“Is that so... Lord Justice’s been working nonstop, too.” Father Marshall gazed at a corner of the Great Chapel. Only that spot was illuminated by a faint, pale blue light. It was the light emitted by Justice’s Holy Staff.

“How are you feeling...?”

“I feel better already, all thanks to you...”

The blond-haired boy was directing the light from the staff toward the patients. The holy light possessed the power to neutralize magic, and simply being bathed in it had already helped them recover significantly. “Take care of yourself. Get some rest.”

Justice stood up and smiled warmly at Ilsie. “Ilsie, your mother is next.”

“What about everyone else...?”

“Yeah, I’ve treated everyone. It took a little while, though.” Weaving his way through the patients lying on the floor, Justice walked over to the girl. Together with Father Marshall, the two began climbing the stone stairs to the second floor.

“I moved Mom to the second floor. My room is there...”

“I see. So you’ve been living here at the Holy Church?” Justice continued speaking as he climbed the stairs. “It must be hard to see your hometown tainted by magic...”

“Yes, but since you came, Lord Justice...” Smiling bravely, Ilsie ran her hand through her short blonde hair. “Everyone really... is so grateful.”

Father Marshall nodded silently.

Perhaps feeling self-conscious, Justice kept scratching the nape of his neck.

At the top of the dim staircase, a long corridor stretched out. Several small rooms lined both sides of the corridor. Both the priest’s room and Ilsie’s room were located there.

“I wonder if Mom’s already gone to sleep.” Ilsie reached out toward the door to her room. And then...

“...Is that you, Ilsie?” The door creaked as it opened slightly from the inside.

“Oh no, Mom, are you awake?” Reacting to the voice, Ilsie smiled. “You’re supposed to be sleeping. You’re not fully recovered yet, are you?”

“I’m feeling much better now. Thanks to you, Ilsie...” Her voice echoed down the hallway through the tiny crack in the door. “Besides, if the Holy Officer is coming back, I thought I should thank you...”

“You don’t need to go out of your way like that.” Justice looked up at Ilsie, and they smiled at each other.

“And Mom still needs treatment, too.”

“Oh, that’s right. Well then...” The door opened a little wider.

“...I suppose I should have you check my body, too...”

In that instant, something illuminated Justice’s cheek. The blond boy, still smiling, slowly looked up at the Holy War Staff he was holding. The rare gem, Metalite, adorning its tip had suddenly begun to emit a garish red glow.

“W-what the...!”

“Noooooo!” Ilsie’s screams mingled with Justice’s shock.

Inside the open door, it remained pitch black, devoid of any light. From that darkness, only her mother’s arm, gripping the doorknob, was visible.

Rather than simply gripping it... what appeared to be her mother's arm was wrapped around the knob.

"I-Irene... you...!" Marshal called out her name, staring intently at what looked like her arm.

The arm that had opened the door was actually a slimy, green tentacle covered in mucus.

"You two, get back!" Shielding Marshall and Ilsie with his body, Justice gripped his Holy War Staff with both hands.

Before the three of them, the door slowly swung open.

A suffocating stench filled the air. The legs extending from the hem of her nightgown had also transformed into similar tentacles. Countless breathing suction cups writhed across its surface.

But the transformation hadn't spread to her entire body. As far as her face was concerned, Ilsie's mother, Irene, still retained her human form. However, the eerie corruption had already covered half her face. With her cheeks and neck now green, her mother stepped out into the hallway.

"What's the matter? Why are you so startled…?" Smiling at her daughter, she took another step forward. "I'm your mother… Come on, come to me…"

"Run!" At the same moment Justice issued his warning, Irene also began to sprint. It was not the movement of a middle-aged woman, let alone one who was ill. Like a carnivorous beast facing its prey, Ilsie's mother charged at the three of them in the narrow hallway.

"Gaaah!" A low, guttural roar erupted from Irene's throat. Her raised left arm instantly extended, bending and twisting wildly. That single strike struck Father Marshall squarely.

"Whoa!"

"Father!"

Knocked down, Father Marshall lost his balance and fell sideways. He crashed into the door of another room and was blown inside along with the door. But Irene didn't stop running.

"Mom! Mom!"

"Hold on! We're falling!" Justice grabbed Ilsie with one arm and hoisted her up forcefully.

"Ow!"

Behind them lay only the stone steps they had just climbed. The footing was far too unstable to hold them back.

With a burst of momentum, Justice leaped all the way down to the floor below. His right foot broke through a rotting floorboard. Pain and shock shot straight to the top of his head, but he quickly pulled his right foot free and shoved Ilsie toward the exit. "Take the people on the first floor and run! Hurry!" Justice gripped his Holy War Staff in both hands and shouted sharply. "While I hold it off…"

"But Lord Justice, Mom is…" Just as she screamed, Irene came running after them. She too leaped down the stone steps, landing on the first floor in a cloud of dust. She had completely smashed through the floorboards, reaching all the way down to the subfloor.

"Your mother… your mother…" Justice was desperately trying to catch his breath. He started to speak, then suddenly turned his gaze behind him. There was the entrance to the Great Chapel. From there, too, shadows with green tentacles were appearing. And there wasn't just one. Justice recognized their faces as well. They were all the critically ill patients he had treated earlier that day. "No way… what about the others…!"

And then, for the first time, he noticed. A foul, fishy stench was wafting out from the Great Chapel. A vast pool of fresh blood flowed across the floor, and the stench of death pierced his nostrils.

Every one of the critically ill patients, now transformed, wete holding someone's torn-off arm or leg in their mouth.

"No way… just a moment ago… just a moment ago, everyone…" But the patients' expressions were filled with ecstasy. Splattered with blood and reeking of it from head to toe, they were gnawing voraciously on the flesh of their prey.

Justice instinctively took a step back at the sight of their ecstatic expressions. "...Mutant beasts..." He spat out the words, swallowing her fear. "...How could... humans turn into mutant beasts..."

"Lord Justice! Watch out!"

Irene leaped out from beneath the floor toward the Holy Crusader. She raised the tentacles on both arms and slammed them down with all her might.

The Holy Warrior parried the blow with his staff and leaped back toward the wall. "Call Riot! And Zeed too!"

The stained-glass window shattered, raining shards down on Justice's head.

Even so, the boy kept shouting at Ilsie. "You can't stay here! Run away!"

A creature — one that could be called a human mutant — lunged at the screaming Justice. It aimed for his face, struck at his legs, and pursued him relentlessly. Justice ran through the cramped church, desperately trying to reach the exit. If he stayed inside, there would be no escape. Especially since he had already used his miracle twice that day. "Why is this happening?!" Cursing the situation, he struck the human mutant beast down with his Holy War Staff - but Irene, who had approached from behind, delivered a powerful blow to Justice's spine.

"Gah...!" With a short scream, he collapsed to the floor. Irene pinned herself on top of him.

"Mom, stop! Mom!" Ilsie squeezed out the words desperately.

But Irene, slowly lifting her face, responded only with a bloodthirsty grin. She drooled copiously onto her prey — Justice — whom she had pinned down with her limbs.

"Don't worry about me... Ilsie, hurry!"

However, just as Ilsie froze in her tracks, monsters leaped at her from the side. Two of them, one from each side, rushed toward the girl standing frozen at the exit.

"Noooooo!" With a scream, Ilsie crouched down. She collapsed down the short stone steps from the Holy Church's entrance and tumbled all the way down to the front courtyard. But the mutated beasts did not stop their pursuit.

"Ilsie!" Irene's fangs closed in on Justice's throat as he shouted. Even so, Justice formed a holy seal and pointed her Holy War Staff toward Ilsie. "Final Strike!"

"Aaaah!" Terrified by the pale blue light emitted by the Holy War Staff, Irene's strength waned. Quickly breaking free from her restraints, Justice set his sights on the mutated beast attacking Ilsie.

"Circumventing Impact...! "

"Duck, Ilsie!" Suddenly, a powerful voice echoed through the night.

From beyond the dark cityscape, a crimson tornado leaped forward, wielding a greatsword. With a blade of holy steel Zodanium, the Battle Armor Demon Riot burst onto the battlefield.

“Where on earth did you guys come from?!” The blow, swung down from above, slammed into the mutant beast’s shoulder. It sliced through its flesh, cleaving its body in two at an angle. With a blood-curdling scream, the mutant beast collapsed to the ground.

“What the — no way, this guy…!” Immediately after the strike, Riot realized something.

Ilsie was clinging to her back. “They’re the patients! Everyone! All of them!”

Shielding the terrified, screaming Ilsie with her back, Riot readjusted her greatsword. Directly in front of the blade’s tip, patients who had mutated into beasts began appearing one after another. Making no sound, they spread out across the church’s forecourt. Gathering into a formation without a sound, they suddenly pounced on Riot.

“Ilsie, stay behind me!” She shouted, swinging her greatsword through the air. She severed the arms of one attacking creature and cut off its head. Ducking to avoid a monster that crashed down, spewing bodily fluids, she thrust the tip of her blade into the throat of another.

In the blink of an eye, Riot had pushed back the vanguard - but the enemies showed no sign of backing down. They wrapped their tentacles around the eaves of a house and crawled up onto the roof. Using the suction cups on their tentacles, they slithered out to the left and right of Riot and the others.

“They’re fast, Riot! Watch out... Whoa!” Just as Justice issued the warning, Irene pounced on him again. Wrapping her tentacles around his body, she tried to sink her teeth into Justice’s throat with all her might. Lying on his back, Justice could only defend himself with his Holy War Staff.

“You’re the one who needs to watch out! I’m coming!” Shouting, Riot tried to rush to her partner’s side - but from the rooftops, the mutated beasts began leaping with great momentum. Their roars cut through the air.

“Get out of my way...!” Riot swiftly slashed away the attack from his right - but seizing the opening, another creature charged in from the left. Before she could even reposition his greatsword, a tentacle wrapped itself around the Battle Armor Demon’s arm.

“You’re a fast little bastard...!” As Riot clicked her tongue, the monster’s fangs closed in on her. But...

“Giiiiiiih!” The human mutant, which had closed in to within inches, was sliced open across the back by a single stroke. Emerging from the darkness was the sharp tip of a spear wielded by a massive, heavily armored spearman.

“Bulk!” Riot called out the name of the giant man who had come to his aid.

The spearman nodded silently. Then, swinging his long spear, he whipped up a gust of wind. Another mutant that had closed in a moment later was also cleaved in two by the spearhead. His defensive spear technique was as impenetrable as a wall of iron.

“Lady Riot!” This time, Ilsie’s scream rang out from behind her.

Mutants that had leaped across the rooftops had, unnoticed, slipped up behind them. Several of them descended silently to the ground and closed in on the young Exorcist.

“Don’t run, Ilsie!” Riot drew a large pistol from her waist and zeroed in on the enemy behind her - but the enemy’s movements were too fast. The Mutated Beasts swarmed toward Ilsie, who fell to the ground in a cloud of dust.

“Gah...!”

“Aaaargh!”

Ilsie and the mutated beasts crossed paths. It was too late to shoot.

But from across the street, the sharp crack of a whip reached the battlefield. “Attack, Gustav!” Rachel shouted the sharp command to her dog. “I can’t have my client killed!” At the same moment, a muffled roar erupted - Gustav, the demon hound with his gray fur bristling, charged at the mutated beast at breakneck speed and knocked it aside. He unleashed a barrage of fireballs at the fallen enemy, reducing it to a ball of flames. Then, standing tall on all four legs, he shielded the fallen Ilsie.

“Gustav, hold that position!” Rachel confronted the new attackers as they charged in - she struck the creature squarely in the face with her whip, halting its movement. Seizing the moment it flinched, she hurled a dagger with one hand. The blade pierced straight through its neck, and the mutated beast collapsed, writhing in agony.

“Ilsie, pull yourself together!”

“R-Rachel...!”

Rachel shielded the staggering girl with her back. Then she whistled behind her.

“Bradley, Walker, spread out to the left and right!” As soon as the order was given, the spearmen of the Red Flame Raiders charged forward. They formed ranks and lined up alongside Bulk. The mercenaries advanced boldly, without a single misstep, undaunted by the mutant beasts.

“Go save that boy! Break through the Riots’ lines for him!”

“Keep going! Don’t lose your nerve!”

The mercenaries’ ranks collided head-on with the horde of mutated beasts. The Red Flame Raiders, spears at the ready, drove the beasts back, scattering them with their spearheads.

Rachel, issuing orders, was calmly assessing the situation. “Ridgeway, fire the grenades! Cover the front lines!” The moment the order was given, two soldiers clutching 50mm grenade launchers opened fire. Aiming at the enemies remaining in front of the Holy Church, the grenades erupted with a loud explosion.

“Thanks! Perfect timing!” Shouting, Riot surged forward - she pushed off the ground and sprinted through the blast.

Beyond the white smoke, Justice and Irene were still locked in combat.

Staring at Irene’s fangs right before him, Justice was pouring all his strength into his arms.

“Justice!” Riot shouted, raising her pistol to take aim - but emerging from the white smoke, the remaining mutated beasts pounced from both sides. “Gah...!”

One of them sank its teeth deep into her right arm, where she held the gun. Its long fangs pierced through the synthetic skin. She tried to thrust with the sword in her left hand, but another tentacle had already wrapped itself around that arm as well.

“Don’t get in my way!” Restrained on both sides, Riot’s charge came to a halt.

Yet right before her eyes, Justice was about to have his neck bitten off.

“These bastards...!” Riot clenched his teeth in frustration.

“What are you dawdling for, Riot?!” A voice suddenly rang out from above him. “They’re not exactly opponents you should be struggling with!”

Leaping over the smoke, Zeed had arrived. Curling his body, he dove straight toward Riot. In both hands, his electromagnetic knives gleamed with a sharp, menacing light. Swinging the knives from side to side like a tornado, the black-haired warrior in battle armor pounced on the mutated beast.

“Uraaaaaah!” Zeed sliced through the mutated beast’s neck, tore its arm apart, and split its torso in two. In an instant, he reduced the enemy to a pile of flesh, then turned and slashed diagonally across the face of another.

“Giiiiiiih!”

He mercilessly kicked the screaming mutant beast away. He smiled briefly at Riot, who had been freed from her restraints, and gave her a nod.

“If you dawdle, your partner’s gonna get killed, you know?” His mobility and striking power far surpassed Riot’s - but this was no time to stand around impressed.

“I’ll thank you later!” She holstered her pistol and resolved to charge head-on.

Perhaps sensing Riot’s move, Zeed dashed to the side. The two Battle Armor Demons charged furiously toward Irene, who was pinning Justice to the ground.

“Riot! Mom...!”

“Ilsie, don’t go!” Rachel held back the crying Exorcist girl.

Riot could hear her screams too.

(Sorry, I forgot... That your mother is already...) Gripping a greatsword in each hand, she drove the blades straight forward - Riot attempted to pierce Irene’s side in a single stroke. “Justice, now!”

“Riot!” At that signal, Justice thrust his Holy War Staff upward with all his might.

Overwhelmed by the boy’s unexpected strength, Irene’s upper body jerked back for an instant. Without a moment’s hesitation, the Battle Armor Demon lunged in. “Sorry, but you….”

Just as she began to speak, some kind of power… emanated from Irene’s body. At the same moment, her bloodthirsty face suddenly… morphed back to her usual, kind face.

“W-what is this…!” Irene cried out, as if coming to her senses.

With the killing intent gone, Riot’s charge came to an abrupt halt. “N-no way, you...!” Justice, too, looked up at Irene with a pale, bloodless face.

Irene stared at the approaching Riot, looked down at the collapsing Justice, and finally... stared intently at her own utterly transformed body. “Noooooooo!” Waving her green tentacles about, Irene let out a bloodcurdling scream. “What is this! What is it! Ilsie! Ilsie!”

“Mom!” Ilsie returned the scream to the monster screaming like a madwoman. Slipping past Rachel’s stunned arms, she ran toward her mother.
“Wait, Ilsie! Come back!”
“Mom! Mom!”
But Irene, running frantically, could do nothing but scratch at the suction cups covering her entire body.
“Someone, take these off! Make me normal again! Somebody! Please!”
“Irene, pull yourself together!” Just as Justice shouted and sat up,
“Shut up, you mutant beast!” There was a dull, wet tearing sound. Zeed, who had crept up from behind, was thrusting the tip of his electromagnetic knife into her back. The blade pierced through her body, reaching her chest, and a gush of green fluid spurted out.
“Zeed, you—!”
“Mom!”
Screams and cries of agony intertwined amidst the drifting white smoke.
But Zeed paid no heed, slashing at Irene’s throat with his other blade. Gurgling, Irene spat bodily fluid from her throat. Her body snapped in two, and Ilsie’s mother collapsed onto the stone steps of the Holy Church.
“M-Mom…!” Gasping for breath, Ilsie muttered, then fainted in despair.
“Ilsie! Pull yourself together! Come on!” Rachel’s voice, as she lifted the girl to her feet, rang out in vain.
In front of his dazed mercenary subordinates, Zeed wiped the green bodily fluid caked onto his blade. “That was over surprisingly quick. A mutated beast with no fight in it.”
“You bastard...!” Filled with rage, Riot lunged at the mercenary captain.
But Zeed twisted his arm and tossed her to the ground with ease.
“You idiot! What’s the point of hesitating against a mutated beast?!”
“But it had come to its senses!”
“That doesn’t mean there’s any guarantee it’ll be friendly!”
A fierce clash. Their screams collided head-on.
Riot, crawling on the ground, looked up at Zeed, and Zeed looked down at Riot.
“Even the infamous Riot has gotten pretty soft, huh? I’m disappointed.” Saying only that, he turned his back. A bitter, unpleasant aftertaste spread among the group.
“Riot...” Justice stood up in a daze and called out in a voice barely above a whisper.
But Riot remained silent, continuing to glare at Zeed’s back. Then she clenched the ground in her fist. The sensation of the unusually hot battlefield soil lingered in her hand for what felt like an eternity.

【Chapter 3: Cazeline Pass / The Conspiracy】

“Did you mess up, Gates?” The woman’s thoughts spoke with a sneer. “Or was failure part of the plan? Either way, we didn’t achieve our objective.”
“It was just a slight miscalculation.” The man exhaled deeply, his composure evident. “I didn’t think he was cold-blooded enough to kill citizens who’d turned into Mutant

Beasts. And in fact, that's exactly how it turned out – even that Battle Armor Demon, Riot, hesitated. The one I didn't account for was that other Battle Armor Demon." The man's thoughts wandered as he summoned a visual record of the recent battle."

Zeed showed no hesitation whatsoever as he struck down Ilsie's mother. As if taking pleasure in it, the man's thoughts echoed with a low chuckle.

"Are you trying to pass off your own failure as praise for the enemy?" Suppressing her irritation, the woman glared at Gates from the side. "This will make them aware of our existence. Until now, they probably thought it was just a malfunction in the magic lines... but they can't be that stupid."

"Are you saying they've figured it out and are on their way here, Iglia?"

"If it's Justice, he'll definitely arrive here before the ritual ends...

"What makes you think tha..." Just as the man's thoughts were about to ask that question, the pulsating darkness trembled convulsively. Its heartbeat quickened, accelerating rapidly. Spreading an oppressive aura, a colossal presence tore through space and revealed itself.

As if to avoid the overwhelming energy, the man's thoughts recoiled. "If they sent you here, it seems the Round Table Conference is getting serious."

"Watch your tongue, Gates. You're being too clever." With a contemptuous smile, the woman's thoughts looked up at the colossal presence. "The Round Table Conference is no issue. I hear the order to dispatch him came from even higher up."

"I-in that case...!" For the first time, the man's thought showed fear.

But the colossal aura remained silent, breathing quietly.

Finally grasping the situation, the man's thought regained its cunning smile. "I see. Well then, that will boost our morale. The more guests, the better. Next time, I'll take direct command myself."

"Wait. Next time, we'll go with my plan. I've already gotten approval from..."

"What?! At the woman's words, the man's anger flared. But he immediately glanced at the massive aura. "You're quick, as always, Iglia. At least when it comes to currying favor."

"Shut your mouth. I'm not like you." With the colossal aura at her back, the woman replied with a cold smile. "Brute force alone makes me yawn. What I like is… traps." The moment she spoke, the colossal aura rumbled. Its low, resonant voice echoed off the flesh-colored walls.

The colossal aura finally transformed its thoughts into words. "That Holy War Officer will surely come here; that, too, is his fate... I shall sever that fate. This is the will of the Absolute One.."

Even the darkness itself trembled with a faint sense of dread at that name.

"The General-rank Evil Spirit Olog Zei...?" Riot confirmed the name once more.

Nodding, Father Marshall held his right hand out toward the wall. "I believe that he has been resurrected." The priest's arm was wrapped in fresh bandages. It seemed he had broken two bones last night when he was attacked by Ilsie's mother. Bruises

covered his entire body. Nevertheless, braving the pain and leaning on his cane, the priest walked toward the stone wall.

"It is an evil spirit that wreaked havoc in these parts some six hundred years ago. Legends say that he used dark magic to transform not only animals but even humans into mutated beasts. Ah, here too..." The wall he pointed to was densely covered with ancient sacred script. The walls of the dim basement were entirely covered by this string of characters. It was the secret archive established beneath the Holy Church. "'The wife who became a beast devours my child. Escapes from the house at midnight...' It's hard to see, isn't it?"

"Just so you know, I can't read it. Justice...?"

"'She attacks the neighboring house. She devours the flesh of the infant and flees to Zozwell,' right?" Stepping closer to the wall, Justice read the text fluently. Then, he suddenly looked up at Father Marshall. "But what is Zozwell? Is it the name of a place?"

"Yes. It's the name of a town located about fifty kilometers southwest of here. Though it's not a town anymore. Only ruins buried in sand remain."

"That's…"

"Yes, it's because of Olog-Zei." Marshall sighed and sat down on the stone steps. "It is said that Olog-Zei first appeared in the town of Zozwell. He turned the townspeople into mutated beasts and made them attack nearby towns and villages. Naturally, they were gathering sacrifices to fuel its growth. To defeat it, a holy warrior named Saint Paul is said to have come to Zozwell."

Riot noticed the intricate carvings on the wall.

A man clutching a holy staff faced a massive, swirling Evil Spirit. It was none other than a depiction of the battle from six hundred years ago. "So, how did the battle end?"

"It is recorded in the next carving." Where Marshall pointed, the figures of Saint Paul and the evil spirit were carved as they fell into the abyss. The rift in the earth had swallowed up even the cityscape. "It is said their battle lasted three days and three nights, and in its aftermath, the city of Zozwell was destroyed. For six hundred years since then, no one has lived in that city; but beneath it…"

"So that's where the Evil Spirit General Olog Zei is said to slumber, isn't it?" At Justice's words, Marshall nodded quietly. Then the blond-haired boy pressed his lips together and shifted his gaze to Riot.

The Battle Armor Demon remained silent as well, grinding her teeth at the gravity of the situation.

(A Demon of the General rank, huh...)

The Demons form a strict hierarchical society with the Demon Emperor Lucifer at its apex. Among the twelve ranks, the Demon General is the sixth rank, the middle tier. However, up until now, Riot and Justice had only encountered Demon Counts, the seventh rank. Even these rarely show themselves in the human world. And a fierce battle with a General-rank — a battle beyond imagination — was inevitable.

That was the crux of the matter. An Evil Spirit ranking higher than the Count class. An unknown power.

"I just analyzed the penetration pattern of the contamination levels," maintaining a calm tone, Riot turned back to the two of them. "The concentration gets higher the further southwest we go. If the source of the contamination matches the Zozwell Ruins..."

"It surely does." Justice realized this too and nodded firmly. "Olog Zei is trying to resurrect itself — for the first time in six hundred years... The abnormal magical contamination in this area must be the cause. If that's the case, we have no choice but to stop it...!"

Riot ran her fingers through her fiery hair in frustration. "Yeah, what happened last night wasn't just caused by the pollution. It was clearly an attack set up to kill us... no, maybe even to kill you, the Holy War Officer. If that's the case, it means there are Blood Pact members serving Olog Zei." She spoke, then exhaled deeply. "We're already being targeted."

"That's fine. Let them come." Justice gripped her Holy War Staff with dignity and smiled at Riot. "The fact that they struck first might mean they're desperate too. If they still need time to resurrect, then we won't give them the chance."

"That might be true, or it might not. But..." Riot smiled as well, steeled in resolve. "It's going to be a tough fight. You know that, right?"

Justice nodded, and Father Marshall reverently formed the sign of the cross. "Oh, God of Creation. Please, soften the calamity that is about to befall these two…"

"Don't say calamity's about to strike us now — it's bad luck!" At Riot's click of the tongue, Justice regained her usual smile. Just then.

"Uh, excuse me..."

"Yikes, you scared me!" Startled by the sudden voice, Riot turned around.

Rachel was standing on the stone steps leading to the ground, having appeared without her noticing. The houndmaster, clutching her whip, pressed her lips together as if she wanted to say something.

"What is it, Rachel? Did you come looking for dog food or something?"

"It's not that..." Her voice lacked energy. Seeing the frustration and anxiety in her expression, Riot straightened her posture.

"What's going on up there..."

"There's a fight going on. Between the captain and the townspeople…" She plucked up the courage to speak. Then she ran her fingers through her blonde hair.

"Could you come up? I… I can't do anything about it." Hearing those words and that tone, Riot exchanged glances with Justice.

The sudden wave of revulsion that washed over him tasted bitter.

"That's not what we agreed on!" Banging his fist on the table, Zeed looked around at the group. "We're mercenaries. We exterminate mutant beasts and then demand payment. Can't you even follow that basic rule in this town?"

They were in a room inside the half-destroyed city hall. Gathered in the large room were only those considered influential figures among the citizens of Dallas. There were about twenty of them, effectively forming a delegation.

From among them, a burly middle-aged man stepped forward, his anger plain to see.

"My son was among them! I won't stand you calling him a mutant beast!"

"Don't be ridiculous! What part of that thing is human, anyway?" Zeed slammed his fist down on the table once more. "After devouring other patients, calling that thing human is a joke!"

"You—!" The man lunged at Zeed with fury. But the Battle Armor Demon grabbed his arm and slammed him effortlessly against the wall. With a short scream, the man collapsed to the floor.

"Mr. Hodges!"

"You! Cut it out!"

The citizens clenched their fists and surrounded Zeed.

But the Battle Armor Demon sat down on a chair, completely unfazed. Ignoring everyone's stares, he spat on the floor. "You're the ones who need to cut it out. Am I supposed to work for free and have my work criticized on top of that? I've been a mercenary for years, but this is the first time I've been treated like this!" He brought his fist down hard on the table. The blow split the wooden table in two.

Just as the sound of the shattering echoed, the door suddenly swung open.

"W-what are you all doing?!" Justice couldn't help but shout in the midst of the commotion.

Led by Rachel, Riot followed in, too. Marshall tailed them, his face contorted by the hostile atmosphere. "Everyone, what on earth is going on here…?"

"Oh, perfect timing, Father." Zeed addressed Marshall in a deliberately exaggerated tone. "You guys at the Holy Church are offering bounties for hunting Mutant Beasts. Why don't you just pay up the bounties for the sixteen Mutant Beasts we took down yesterday?"

(So that's what this is about...) Riot immediately grasped the situation and looked down at Zeed with a grim expression.

The Battle Armor Demon sat back in his chair as if it were only natural. From his perspective, he probably didn't think he'd done anything wrong. But…

"Father, are you admitting it?! That our families have become Mutant Beasts?"

"Yes, are you admitting it too?!"

"I refuse! I want to believe my wife died as a human!"

Desperation was etched on the citizens' faces as well.

If a body is deemed that of a Mutant Beast, burial in a cemetery is forbidden, and it must be donated to the New Continent Crusade. There, it becomes a test subject for weapons designed to combat Demon Gods and Mutant Beasts.

No one intended for the remains of their loved ones to be treated that way.

"Could you wait a moment, Mr. Zeed?" Justice stepped forward hesitantly. "It's only been a day since what happened yesterday. Everyone is in a state of shock after losing their loved ones. There's no need to rush to a conclusion…"

"But the contract we signed clearly states payment is due the following day." Zeed folded his arms as he surveyed the citizens. "We kept our promise and fought the Mutant Beasts. But if you can't keep yours, the contract is void. Go find another mercenary unit right now. You probably don't have the time, and I doubt any fool would hire a town that won't pay."

"Riot..." Faced with those merciless words, Justice looked up at his partner.

But even Riot couldn't find the right words to say on the spot. Neither side was wrong. The problem was whose side to take. There was absolutely no room for compromise.

Rachel could only stare at the mercenary captain, who was openly seething with anger.

Just as everyone began to feel the suffocating tension...

"Wait! I'll pay you right now!" Suddenly, Ilsie pushed open the door. She was carrying a heavy-looking bag in her hand. "I'm sorry I'm late. Here's the bounty for sixteen Mutant Beasts — 400,000 dorc. That's four hundred gold coins of one thousand

dorcs each. You can check it if you want." The young Exorcist held the bag out in front of Zeed.

Instantly, Zeed's face began to soften. "What? You're okay with this? Well, that makes things easy." Snatching the bag from her, Zeed quickly scanned its contents.

At the same moment, angry shouts erupted from the citizens.

"Nonsense, Ilsie! We don't have to pay them anything!"

"Are you admitting that my family are Mutant Beasts?!"

But Ilsie stood her ground, facing their fury with resolve. "My mother died too. As a Mutant Beast, of course." She stated it matter-of-factly. Then, as if to calm the adults, she continued speaking solemnly. "It is a tragedy that my mother died. However, she killed other patients. From the perspective of their families, my mother is surely the one who cannot be forgiven."

The citizens fell silent. Ilsie took a deep breath and continued.

"It cannot be helped that we cannot bury my mother here. Since she took the lives of others, she must be donated as a cadaver to serve the Church and the New Continent Crusade."

"But it's not your mother's fault!" One person choked out, sobbing. "My son is the same! He didn't choose to become a Mutant Beast!"

"Regardless of the reason, the fact remains that they killed others." Ilsie declared, her tone hardening. "Furthermore, it was I who entered into the contract with the Red Flame Raiders. I was entrusted with full authority, and I signed the contract with them. If you have any complaints, take them up with me, not them. I bear full responsibility for their actions...!"

It was an overwhelming, unquestionable aura of authority — hardly what one would expect from a girl. Perhaps Ilsie had no other choice but to say that to resolve the situation.

Realizing this, Riot finally spoke up. "Leave the rest to us. We have Holy War Officer Justice here... We'll avenge them."

Justice, though belatedly, nodded to the citizens.

Reluctantly, the town representatives left the room, their dissatisfaction still evident.

"Ilsie, you..." Justice stepped toward the young Exorcist.

But Ilsie offered a brave smile. "It's okay. What I just said was what I truly felt. I don't regret it. It's just..." The girl looked up at Father Marshall apologetically. "My precious savings are already completely gone..."

"That's all right, Ilsie. The Holy Church will cover the bounty for now, but His Holiness the White Pope will reimburse us for it. If you run short, just go to the Holy Church headquarters in the capital city of Shian. With my signature, they should let you withdraw the bounty." Marshall gently placed his hand on the girl's small shoulder.

But Zeed, having finished counting the gold coins, flashed a wicked grin at the two of them. "Huh, so you've got some spare cash? That's good to hear. Well then, I suppose I'll make a little more money in this town. I've got quite a few things I need to buy, you see." He stood up, took a gold coin from his pouch, and flicked it into the air with his fingertip. "There are still weapons I want to collect. I was

thinking of saving a little, but... It seems I won't need to. I think I'll treat myself to something delicious for the first time in a while."

At that smile, Justice's light blue eyes clouded over with sadness.

(This man...) Riot, too, felt a burning rage rising deep within her gut. Anger surged into her fists, and a roar rose to the back of her throat.

But before she could act, Rachel lunged forward. She swung her right hand wide and slapped Zeed across the cheek. A thousand dorc gold coins spilled from Zeed's hand.

"What the hell are you doing, you…!"

"I don't know, I don't know either!" Facing a bewildered Zeed, Rachel lashed out with her own confusion. "I… I don't know! I don't know why I feel this way! But I don't want that money! And I don't want to see my captain like that either!"

In front of a stunned Justice, the houndmaster voiced her anguish. Zeed spat on the floor once more and began rubbing the cheek his second-in-command had struck. "This money is fair compensation. The townspeople who are complaining are the ones who are crazy."

"Maybe so. But somehow… I just… I hate that money! I don't want to take it!"

"Don't talk nonsense. It's for everyone's living expenses." Zeed tried to laugh off Rachel's outburst. "We've got to take this much just to feed everyone. That's how we've always done it, hasn't it?"

"I've been fine with it until now. But… yesterday, the one you killed was Ilsie's mom! She was a human!"

As Rachel clenched her fists, the young Exorcist girl gently approached her. "Rachel, as for that… it's already…"

"It's not okay! And you're no better yourself!" The hound handler kept shouting, not caring that her blonde hair was getting tousled. "How can you put up with that much?! Your mother is dead! We killed her, and now we're taking your money too! Don't you care at all?!"

"Rachel!" Shouting, Riot grabbed her arm. "Of course I care. Ilsie's sad too. But just now, I had no choice but to say that to keep everyone together."

"I'm sorry..." Rachel regained her composure at those words and sank into her chair, as if all her strength had left her.

Zeed sighed in exasperation and picked up the gold coins from the floor. "I'm working for everyone's sake. If there's money to be made, I don't want to let a single mutant beast get away. You know that, don't you?"

"To you, Captain, it might just be a mutant beast, but to Ilsie, it was her parent..."

"You keep saying the same thing over and over. It's annoying."

"Then... what if I became a mutant beast?" Rachel spat out the words in a low voice. "If I became one of those, what would you do? Would you still kill me? For the money..."

"Rachel!" At that question, Justice's face stiffened as well.

Riot stared at the mercenary captain's face.

But Zeed remained silent for a moment, scratching the back of his neck as if at a loss. "I'll think about it… when the time comes…"

“Captain!” With Rachel’s voice ringing in his ears, Zeed walked out of the room. The hound handler left behind slumped her shoulders, covered her face with her hands, and began to sob. “He’s not… he’s not the kind of person who would say something like that, really… but why… why did it have to come to this…”

“Rachel…” Ilsie stroked the hound handler’s trembling back and turned her gaze toward Justice. “Lord Justice, what should we do now…”

“First and foremost, we must identify the root cause and cut off the source of the contamination.” The blond-haired boy spoke up, as if to shake off the awkwardness. “Zozwell, the city that was destroyed six hundred years ago. I intend to go there.”

At those words, Riot nodded silently.

To prevent any further tragedy.

The wind from the southwest was only growing stronger.

Perhaps the concentration of soot was increasing as well; the wind was growing darker. Naturally, the magical radiation levels were likely rising too. It was a sandstorm carrying death.

“Ugh! My clothes are going to get all black!” Justice muttered as he scrambled over the rocky terrain. Once they finally reached the top of the cliff, they should have been able to see the entire southwestern part of the Zoana Desert - but visibility was far too poor. Not only was the horizon obscured, but even the sandy ground below was swallowed up by the black wind. The gale was so strong it was painful to keep his eyes open.

“My beautiful skin is going to get all rough… Augh… I’ll check it out.” Riot, who had caught up from behind, switched her vision to dust-proof mode. The Battle Armor Demon, having lowered a triple protective shield over her eyes, compared the map in her hand with the terrain below. “We’re on the right path. If we keep going like this, we’ll reach the Zozwell Ruins, but…” Frustrated by the erratic compass, Riot brushed her bangs back. “Sure enough, there’s a huge fissure just before the town. It’s sixty meters deep, and at its widest point, it’s three hundred meters across.”

“So, we really can’t get there by car, then.”

“It’s not just that we can’t drive through it—it’s dangerous to even get close.”

The boy glanced back at the two Red Flame Raider trucks parked side by side.

Riot nodded and tucked the map away against her chest. “Well, it’s a detour, but we’ll either head south to get to flat ground or cross the pass on the north side.”

“So, what do you think, Riot?”

“Of course, we’ll take the detour and head out onto the open plains.” The Battle Armor Demon declared immediately. “That fissure isn’t even ten kilometers from Zozwell. If the Evil Spirit or the Blood Pact members are there, I think that’s well within their range of action.”

“So it’s ideal terrain for an ambush, huh? But...” Justice also shielded his eyes with his hand, trying to make out the distance. “If we don’t destroy the source of contamination soon, we’ll be giving the Evil Spirit time to revive.”

"The ruins are right around the corner. Now that we've come this far, we can't afford to panic." Just as he was about to agree, Riot brushed the swirling dust from her eyes with his hand. "Though I don't know what Zeed will say."

Justice nodded, gripping his Holy War Staff anxiously.

"Of course we'll take the northern pass. What's wrong with that?" Speaking arrogantly, Zeed plopped his butt down on a chair with a thud.

There was some empty space in the equipment transport trailer. Facing his assembled subordinates, the mercenary captain tapped the map on the table once more with his finger. "What we signed up for was an escort to Zozwell. We have the right to choose the safer route. I'd appreciate it if you'd just leave it to us."

"That's exactly why I think the southern route is safer." Riot, exasperated by his stubbornness, rubbed her face. "If we rush and take the shortest route, it's like walking headfirst into a trap."

Justice and Ilsie exchanged glances too, unsure what to do.

It was Justice and Riot who had suggested going to the ruins of Zozwell. If they could get close to the source of the magical contamination and eradicate its cause, the chaos in the surrounding area would come to an end. That was why they had volunteered. As for the air pollution, they could move about without issue by relying on the purification function of Justice's Holy War Staff.

Ilsie had joined them as well. As a Purification Officer, removing magical contamination was her specialty. While it might not be on par with a miracle, her power, channeled through the rare gemstone amethyst, was certainly promising.

However, as Zeed had said, the Red Flame Raiders had taken on the responsibility of guarding the three of them.

Commander Zeed's orders were, for now, the absolute priority under their contract.

"...We won't know if there's a trap until we get there. But if there is one, we're pulling out right then and there. Blood Pact members and Evil Spirits aren't enemies that we can handle." Flipping his palm open and closed repeatedly and moving his fingers, Zeed spoke up. "Besides, just because you guys get attacked by a Demon God doesn't mean we're under contract to save you. You're free to fight, but don't count on our help."

"That's fine, but I'm talking about the trap." Riot steered the conversation back to the original topic. "Justice, Father Marshall, Ilsie, and I... we believe there's a Demon God and its Blood Pact members at the Zozwell Ruins - and they're probably watching our every move. What's waiting for us isn't a trap we can escape." Taking a sip of water from her glass, Riot continued. "Of course, there might be traps on the southern route too. But the northern one… the Cazeline Pass — there's no way to avoid it. The road is flanked by sheer cliffs on both sides. Even if we tried to escape, this trailer isn't exactly agile." Then she slammed her hand down on the table. "Let's take the southern route, please. It's for your own safety, too."

But Zeed ignored her words and pointed to the Cazeline Pass on the map. "The southern route will cost too much in fuel for the trailer. If I drop you off just past the Cazeline Pass, we'll save a lot of money."

“So that’s where this is going, is it?” Riot was appalled by Zeed’s stinginess, even at this late stage. “Listen, your unit’s lives are on the line here. We still don’t know the full extent of the Blood Pact’s power. To be honest, I don’t even know if I can protect your unit!”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Riot. I can protect my own unit.” Zeed declared with absolute confidence. “I’ve got ultra-high-voltage charged particle cannons built into both my arms. They’re powerful enough to blow up a concrete building with a single shot. They should be effective against the Blood Sworn, too. And since they’re energy-efficient, I have an unlimited supply of rounds.”

“But you’re on your own…”

“I’m not counting on you. I’m stronger than you. If it comes down to it, escaping the Blood Allies’ trap would be a piece of cake.”

Just then, Justice suddenly stood up from his chair. “Um, Mr. Zeed, may I ask you something?”

“Whoa, coming to my rescue, are you, young Holy War Officer? What’s this all about?”

Riot looked at her partner with concern.

But Justice, maintaining his usual smile, asked Zeed. “Um… have you ever fought a Blood Alliance member?”

Suddenly, a wave of tension rippled through the silence.

With his mercenary subordinates watching, Zeed kept rubbing his chin. “Nope, never. Not a single one of my men has either.”

“Then... I think you should be careful. No matter how foolish a Blood Alliance member may be, they’ll use tactics you never could have imagined. This is based on my and Riot’s experience, but...” Justice then turned his gaze toward the silent mercenaries. “Riot and I have fought Blood Pact members countless times. And not once have I ever thought a battle was easy. This time will surely be no different.” Capturing the mercenaries’ attention, the boy declared in a powerful voice. “If you underestimate them, death awaits you. There is no other outcome.”

A long silence hung in the trailer.

But then, one mercenary slowly stood up. “Hey, Captain...”

“What is it, Gavin?”

“Don’t you think we should listen to what the Holy War Officer says?”

At those words, Zeed’s face twisted in anger. “What did you say, you—”

“I mean, we’ve never fought Blood Pact members before, have we?” Another man, who looked like an assault engineer, raised his hand and spoke up. “An expert’s opinion matters. You always listen to our opinions, Captain.”

“That’s right, it’s the same thing.”

“Maybe we don’t need to be so fixated on the shortest route?”

Voices rang out one after another.

Zeed’s anger began to show, and he glared at each soldier who spoke.

But as if to counter that glare, Rachel also slowly stood up. “I agree with Riot’s opinion, too. If we’re thinking about safety… the southern route is better…” The Houndmaster told Zeed in a calm voice.

But Zeed raised his fist in frustration. “Listen up. We’ll send an unmanned reconnaissance drone ahead of the truck to verify the route’s safety. We’ll retrieve the drone every two hours and review the footage. My magic line detection range is two kilometers, you know? It’s more reliable than Justice’s Holy War Staff. We won’t get ambushed. If we have to make a break for it, we’ll detach the trailer and escape in just the truck. That way, we’ll maintain our mobility. Are you still not reassured?” He rattled off the plan in one breath, but his subordinates’ faces were clearly etched with anxiety.

Rachel remained silent, her gaze cast downward.

“What the hell is wrong with all of you… Bulk, are you against me too?” The Battle Armor Demon, his disappointment plain to see, turned his gaze toward the massive figure sitting at the head of the table. But the Heavy Spearman, his expression calm, shook his head. Then he pointed at Zeed.

Instantly, Zeed’s face brightened. “Of course. After all, I’m the commander. It’d be crazy to defy me.”

“That might be true, but right now...”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s now or any other time! I’m your commander!” Shouting as if to push Rachel away, Zeed slammed his fist down on the table. “I devised this plan with everyone’s best interests in mind! Obey my orders! We’ll approach Zozwell via the Cazeline Pass!” Kicking his chair violently, the mercenary captain surveyed the group.

But no one could completely hide their anxiety. Zeed sneered at their faces. “What’s wrong? Is that the look on my subordinates’ faces? Pathetic. The Red Flame Raiders have really hit rock bottom.”

“Zeed, everyone’s worried about an attack by the Blood Sworn...”

“You’re one to talk, little prince!” Cutting Justice off, the mercenary captain snapped at him in a sharp voice. “The possibility that you’re a Blood Oath member… I haven’t ruled that out yet. Naturally, I have no intention of listening to you.”

“You… that’s…”

“You too, Riot. You might be in on it as well.” As Riot’s red eyes flashed, Zeed gave her a mocking smile. “Well, even if you did betray us, I'd take you down. I don’t think you’re that kind of Blood Alliance member.” Then he quickly rolled up the map on the table. Zeed glared at his men and placed his hand on the trailer’s interior door. “Let’s have dinner. I’m hungry. You guys should get ready for tomorrow, too.” Leaving behind a tone that brooked no argument, he vanished through the door.

All that remained was Riot’s lonely sigh.

Dinner was held in the shade of a quiet rocky outcrop.

The two trucks—one for combat and one for equipment transport—were parked side by side in a large rock cave. A wide canvas tarp was stretched between them, serving as a sturdy windbreak. The mercenaries each scooped stew from their field mess kits.

Riot and Justice sat on the rocky ground, their mess kits placed next to Ilsie’s.

“Is that really enough for you, Ilsie?” Justice asked the young Exorcist with concern. “We’ll reach the Kazeline Pass tomorrow. From there, it’s a walk all the way to Zozwell. You’ll need to eat well to make it.”

“I’m fine. I’m not much of an eater to begin with.” Ilsie smiled bravely and pointed at Justice’s bowl. “Besides, you’re leaving the white carrots on the side, Lord Justice.”

“Oh, that’s just because I don’t like them.”

Riot chimed in from the side. “He just doesn’t like boiled white carrots. Don’t worry, his appetite is alright.”

“It’s just… they feel all mushy in my mouth.” Offering that baffling explanation, Justice shoveled the stew into his mouth.

The campfire in front of them tempered the chill of the Zoana Desert and cast a bright light on the three of them as they ate.

“Is there anything we can do, Deputy Commander?” But beyond the flames, Rachel and Bulk were joined by a few mercenaries huddled close. Lowering his voice timidly, one of the mercenaries asked, “My wife back in Dallas is worried, too. It’s my first time fighting Blood Pact members.”

“We’re not fighting — we’re running away. There’s no way we can beat the Blood Pact.” Rachel hung her head, not even touching her stew. “At least, that’s what Zeed says.”

“But are the Blood Pact members the kind of foes you can just run away from?”

“Zeed said he won’t rely on the Holy War Officer, but to me, it just doesn’t seem…”

The others also spoke up, hesitantly.

Riot looked at Rachel’s perplexed profile. For a moment, the houndmaster’s gaze drifted into the distance.

All around them, small groups of mercenaries were gathered in circles around campfires, eating their meals. But in the shadow of a rock, set apart from the others, Zeed lay sulking, fast asleep.

Rachel sighed and ran a hand through her blonde hair. “He’s your captain. When he says he’ll do it, he’ll do it. Trust him.” Forcing a mouthful of stew down her throat, Rachel turned back to the mercenaries. “Norman, Middleton, take the sentry post after you finish eating. Simpson’s taking over at midnight, so you should get some rest now. If the Demon God shows up, I’ll scream to let you know.”

Shrugging, the mercenaries headed off to clear away their dishes.

Then, with a weary smile, Rachel smiled at Riot “This has never happened before, though...”

“....” Riott remained silent, bringing a cup of post-meal Banjil coffee to her lips.

Running a hand through her wavy blond hair, the dog handler stroked Gustav, who was lying beside her. “There were a few times I thought he was being a bit pushy. I mean, I wondered if we really needed to go that far to make money... But still, we stuck with Zeed. He’s a good captain who looks out for us and our families. But you know...”

At those words, Riot responded with a smile. “You mean the fight with that Mutant Beast the other day?”

“Yeah, well, it wasn’t exactly a Mutant Beast — it was Ilsie’s mom, but…”

At those words, the young Exorcist looked up. Ilsie, sitting across the campfire, also stared straight at Rachel. Nodding, the Houndmaster quietly continued.

“I’ve seen you kill Mutant Beasts many times. But at the very last moment, Ilsie’s mother had turned back into a human, hadn’t she? I don’t know why, but the captain killed her right then.” She clicked her tongue at the bitter memory. “It was the first time I’d ever seen him kill a human…” Saying that, she pulled Gustav close by the neck. The demon dog snorted affectionately. “It’s kind of strange how he’s so fixated on his own strategy…”

“He's just a little on edge.” Riot said, her tone full of concern. “It's the first time he'll fight a Blood Pact member, so it’s only natural he’d be nervous. Zeed too, and all of you subordinates. That anxiety is just…”

“Then he should have just taken the southern route like you said, Riot.”

“He’s suspicious of us. There’s no way he's agreeing to that.” Riot gazed at her partner’s face.

Justice had been sitting in silence, clutching his cup of Shiron tea. The tea, which must have been freshly brewed, had already gone completely lukewarm.

“But... I’m actually grateful,” Ilsie spoke up unexpectedly. “Mr. Zeed... he could have chosen to turn back. If he’d chosen that, I wouldn’t have been able to accomplish my mission. I’m grateful just for him guarding me.”

“I’ve said it before, but you really are a patient one!” Half in exasperation, Rachel exclaimed. “Even we, his team, who’ve been together for years, are grumbling about it!”

“But Bulk agreed.”

“Ah, he’s different. No matter what happens, he’ll follow the captain.” Rachel pounded her fist against the chest of the giant standing behind her. “I heard he had his life saved by the Captain once. You’ll obey any order, right?”

But even when asked, Bulk remained silent. He was devouring stew from his bowl — which looked like a washbasin — and smiling contentedly.

Rachel grimaced in exasperation at his appetite. “You really are the only one who never flinches, no matter what happens…”

Riot watched Rachel pouting with a fond smile. The Red Flame Raiders - they were a good unit, close-knit like a family. She was even a little envious. It was just that they hadn’t had a fight this big yet. Justice seemed to understand as well; he laughed and held his hands over the campfire.

“It’s okay. Mr. Zeed is a good person.”

“How would a kid like you know that?”

“Well... he’s always said he’d protect everyone.” The blond boy gave Rachel a small smile. “He said if we were attacked by the Blood Sworn, he’d run away... that he’ll abandon the expensive trailer and run. If he were really stingy, he wouldn’t say something like that.”

Rachel unconsciously stopped stroking her dog. “I-I know that, of course.”

“Yep. Mr. Zeed actually cares more about you all than he does about money. That’s why you’re all following him, isn’t it?”

“Y-yeah... that’s right... of course it is, you idiot!” Rachel’s tone had grown strangely sharp. Her expression was that of someone who’d just remembered something she’d forgotten.

Relieved by that profile, Riot looked down at his partner’s face. Justice was sipping black tea with both hands, his usual smile still on his face.

(There’s straightforward kindness, and there’s twisted kindness... You accept both of those, don’t you...) Riot silently thanked her partner in her heart. Being together made her unbearably happy. But oblivious to those feelings, Justice took a big bite out of the chocolate tart they’d bought in Dallas, smearing chocolate all over his mouth.

Seeing his carefree demeanor, Ilsie couldn’t help but smile.

Riot, feeling reassured, drained his cup of Banjil coffee.

"The prey has crawled out of their lair..." The expanding darkness was gradually intensifying its pulsation. In the midst of it all, the man’s thoughts were fixed on the image before his eyes.

Two armed trucks were racing across a rocky desert swept by black winds. The sheer cliff looming ahead of them filled the man with growing anxiety. "They’re coming straight for the Cazeline Pass… Foolish, but troublesome."

"The ritual still requires time. It is our duty as members of the Blood Pact to stop them." The woman’s thoughts resonated with a cold, ruthless tone as she turned her gaze toward her comrade. "They’ve deployed unmanned reconnaissance drones ahead of the vehicles. Their magical detection waves seem to reach nearly two kilometers. They also have Justice’s Holy War Staff. If we get too close, they’ll notice us immediately."

"Well then, it seems it’s my turn after all." The man could not contain his fighting spirit and grew restless. "It’s impossible to lure them into your trap. We’ll just crush them with brute force."

"That’s not very clever. I told you I don’t like such childish, head-on confrontations." Just as she was about to say “Fortunately,” the woman’s thoughts let out a scoff.

"A surprise attack would be easy at the Cazeline Pass. We’ll strike there.”

"Our approach — and that of the Mutant Beasts — will be detected. Didn’t you just say so?"

"Of course, the initial surprise attack won’t rely on that. I intend to proceed entirely naturally."

The man’s thoughts cast a skeptical glance. "What are you thinking of?"

“Gates, your magic. Bestow a blessing upon them.”

“Huh...” Upon hearing those words, the man immediately understood the plan. “So I’m to finish them off, then?”

“No, gather them. Cold, fear, darkness, chaos.” The woman’s ruthless voice echoed through the darkness. "The resurrection of Lord Olog Zei requires a few sacrifices. The ‘Servants’ have also been seeking some. After throwing them into confusion, you are to capture those mercenaries with your own hands.”

“Understood. I won’t let anyone else take credit for this...!” The man’s thoughts leaped across the dimensional barrier at breakneck speed. “First strike... Froststorm Barrage!”

In response to the roar, the darkness quivered and writhed.

“How unusual, rain.” From the passenger seat of the truck, Rachel spoke in a puzzled tone.

Riot stopped polishing her pistol and glanced out the window.

Before they knew it, large raindrops were pouring down. The rain fell with astonishing force, pounding the rocky mountains. Steam rose thickly from the heat-soaked ground.

“It’s not that unusual. It rains from time to time.” Though she said this, Ilsie looked up at the sky with concern. “But it’s been a while since it’s been this heavy…”

“You’re right. I didn’t bring an umbrella.”

“Come on, are you worried about an umbrella?” Zeed, sprawled on the sofa, laughed off Justice’s remark. “If you want to worry about something, then worry about the Demon God, not the weather. Seriously, you’re still a spoiled brat at heart.”

“Oh… yeah, you’re right… haha.” Reluctantly returning the smile, Justice sat down next to the demon dog, Gustav.

Riot remained silent, peering intently into his polished gun.

In the driver’s seat of the combat truck sat the massive Bulk. The sight of him operating the heavy steering wheel undeterred by the wind and rain was truly reassuring.

Riot and the others huddled together in the small space directly behind him.

On both sides of the winding road, rugged rock faces already loomed high. The gates of Zozwell. They were right in the middle of the Cazeline Pass — a stretch that could be called the most treacherous of all.

“You’d better watch your speed.” Rachel warned, gazing ahead at the rain-shrouded road. “It’s suddenly gotten muddy. Visibility’s poor, so be prepared for an ambush.”

“Don’t worry. We just retrieved the unmanned reconnaissance drone, didn’t we?” Zeed finally sat up and called out to the driver’s seat. “My systems aren’t showing any warnings either. There won’t be any enemies for a while.”

“I hope so.” Riot holstered her pistol and muttered under her breath. Then she glanced out the window once more. (I don’t have the weather data for the Zoana Desert, but... This isn’t normal rainfall.)

Riot enhanced her visual functions and checked the situation outside again. No one had noticed, but outside the moving truck, rain the size of a thumb was falling in torrents. What’s more, it had been pouring heavily for quite some time.

(The surface of the Zoana Desert is hard. Water flows away before it can seep into the ground... down to lower elevations. The place around here where rainwater is most likely to pool is...)

In that instant, she realized. And she lunged toward the driver’s seat. “Bulk, hurry! Make it to the top of that hill up ahead!”

“What’s the matter, Riot? Why the...” Rachel, mid-sentence, froze at the sight of the Battle Armor Demon’s expression.

Sensing something, Justice also sat up in the swaying vehicle.

At the same time, the demon dog Gustav, who had been lying down, stood up in front of them.

Sensing a murderous intent in her beloved dog’s demeanor, Rachel glanced back at the rear seat. Just as she heard a sound and turned her gaze back to the windshield...

“Bulk!” As she screamed, Riot could hardly believe his eyes.

Before them lay a gentle uphill slope. Suddenly, from the crest of that slope, a massive torrent of mud surged toward them with a deafening roar.

“Justice!” She shouted, turning around.

Behind him, the windshield shatters, and Rachel screamed.

Knocked by the impact, Justice clutched Ilsie. The truck’s roof flips sideways in an instant.

Just a few seconds later, Riot was swallowed up by the raging torrent (Gah...!) The tsunami that shattered the glass and surged into the cab tossed Riot’s body about like a leaf. Foam trickled from Riot’s mouth as a message indicating the automatic activation of underwater mode flashed across his retinas. Lowering a protective shield over her eyes, Riot clung to a nearby exhaust pipe with her right hand, as if defying the swirling currents.

(Justice!) In the murky water, Riot desperately searched for her partner. For a split second, a white sacred robe and a girl’s legs crossed her field of vision.

(There! He’s close!) She quickly reached out and grabbed the hem of the sacred robe, which was being tossed about by the muddy torrent. As she pulled him toward herself, Justice’s face — his mouth clenched shut — came into view. Justice also pushed back the current with his Holy Power and, looking panicked, clutched Riot’s arm. Ilsie was clinging desperately to the boy’s body.

(If they’re both conscious... All artificial muscles, limiter off!) She frantically issued the command to activate her willpower and kicked the driver’s side wall with both feet.

With a blow packed with all her strength, Riot reached the crack in the windshield. She escaped from the vehicle, carrying Justice and Ilsie with her.

After riding the current for a while, the water’s surface was soon right before them.

“Phew!” As her face broke the surface, Riot looked around.

The mountain pass had transformed into a muddy river. There was no sign of the truck following behind them. But here and there on the water’s surface, the faces of surviving mercenaries were bobbing up.

“W-we made it!” Leaping onto the riverbank, Justice also gulped down the fresh air. Beside him, Ilsie was frantically spitting out the water she’d swallowed.

“J-Justice!”

“G-good, I’m glad you’re safe!” Riot pushed the two, who were supporting each other, to the side. “The current’s slowing down. Get to shore! You can make it, right?”

“I’m fine! But what about the others…!” Pushing through the gradually receding water, Justice scanned his surroundings.

Then, right next to Riot, a massive bald head suddenly surfaced.

“Bulk, it’s you!”

The giant man silently nodded to the startled Riot. Behind him, the demon dog Gustav floated, his gray head visible. In his massive jaws, he held Rachel, who had lost consciousness.

“Rachel! Pull yourself together, Rachel!” Riot rushed toward the houndmaster and desperately supported her body - but there was no response from Rachel, her face pale. With Gustav flanking her on either side, they cut diagonally across the muddy torrent. On the rugged cliff, Justice had already risen to his feet.

“Gustav, this way! Hang in there!”

“Riot!” Ilsie also planted her feet at the edge of the current and reached out her hand with all her might.

Grasping that hand, Riot pulled Rachel’s body up out of the muddy torrent. “Pull yourself together, Rachel! Come on, just a little!” Riot lightly slapped Rachel’s soaking-wet cheek with the flat of her hand.

Gustav continued to lick her bloodless face with concern. And then...

"Ugh... Guh...” As soon as she regained consciousness, Rachel clutched her stomach. The water that had flowed into her stomach surged back up toward her throat as if in a spasm. Rubbing her back, Justice looked around.

“I-is everyone okay?”

“Most of us made it... but... a few might have been swept away.”

Besides Bulk, mercenaries were desperately crawling up the banks on both sides.

Then, a little later, Zeed also surfaced forcefully from the water.

“Zeed, you’re safe!”

“Of course I am. I’m not about to drown in a desert!” Responding to Justice’s concern, Zeed slowly emerged from the water. With his trusty spear strapped to his back, a safe in his right hand, and a box containing the contracts in his left, he collapsed onto the shore as if he’d just been knocked down. “I was looking for this, so it took me a while. Phew, that was close!” He checked the contents of the safe he’d tossed aside and let out a huge sigh of relief. “Still, both trucks got swept away, huh... That’s gonna hurt! Damn it, and I still have sixteen months left on the loan! I wonder if my car insurance will cover it.”

“Forget that! Think of your subordinates!” Riot shouted, her voice like a punch. She kicked the storage box away with his toe, grabbed the mercenary captain by the collar, and yanked him toward him. “Your men were swept away! Even Rachel… You should be more worried!”

“Ah…” Faced with Riot’s fury, Zeed could only stare in shock.

Then, as if remembering something, he turned his gaze toward the hound handler. Rachel was still breathing heavily, lying face-down on the ground. Gustav was crouched beside her.

At that sight, the blood drained from Zeed’s face. “Rachel, you…” Just as he was about to rush over, it happened.

"Second Strike..."

Suddenly, a low, masculine voice echoed from within the rapidly moving rain clouds. Instinctively, Justice poured his power into the Holy War.

“No way…!”

"Flame Curse Wave Slash!"

A crescent-shaped blast of flame appeared out of nowhere above their heads.

“You’ve got to be kidding me…!” The roaring, ferocious attack plummeted toward Justice.

Zeed doubted his own eyes. The attack completely outpaced the Battle Armor Demon’s tracking capabilities. The invisible assault instantly shattered Zeed’s will to fight.

“That’s magic...”

Even so, Justice shoved Ilsie behind another rock and assumed a battle stance. The offensive magic had already reached right before him.

“Lord Justice!” With Ilsie’s scream, the massive boulder she had been hiding behind exploded with a deafening roar. But piercing through the smoke, Justice had already leaped far backward.

“Justice, the enemy is—”

“No! It’s not over yet!” As Justice shouted, a fireball pursued him from within the white smoke - but the young Holy War Officer had already completed his first summoning.

“Circumventing Impact!” The pale blue lightning released from his fingertips swiftly split into four and flew through the air. Like hunting dogs swarming their prey, the miracles collided one after another with the flying flames.

“Ilsie, get down!” Riot shielded the girl and took cover.

One, two... The collisions shook the surrounding air and scattered immense heat. When the final, fourth bullet was fired, the fiery attacks finally scattered into the sky.

“Nice work, Justice!” At Riot’s words, the boy nodded vigorously.

Seeing this, Zeed could not hide his astonishment. “He actually... deflected that magic...” For the first time, he truly realized the Holy Warrior’s true strength. But Zeed wasn’t the only one whose surprise showed on his face.

The invisible enemy, too, let out a delighted cry at Justice’s interception. "Huh, you're putting up quite a fight... Looks like it was worth the trip..." The voice had clearly drawn closer, coming from directly above.

Riot readjusted her greatsword, and Justice shielded Ilsie with her back.

Unfazed even by the roar of Gustav, the demon hound with bristling fur, the voice echoed with mockery from the dark clouds. “I don’t like this. Such a big show!”

With the fury of a riot, the group looked up at the sky.

The space directly above the muddy torrent began to twist visibly.

The shadow that emerged from the center of the dimensional distortion stood over three meters tall. As the humanoid figure gradually took shape, Justice couldn’t help but let out a gasp of astonishment.

“What the... kind of guy is that...”

“I am Gates, of the Blood Oath...” The man identified himself and swung his weapon with a flash. “Welcome to the tomb of our master...”

The menacing man had hair dyed red and orange, hanging down to his back. His eyes, hungry for flesh and blood, glinted incessantly, and his elongated fangs protruded from his lips. The battle axe he gripped in both hands was about five meters long, its blade gleaming dully, capable of cleaving not just a human, but even a house in two with a single stroke. Sharp spikes protruded from every part of the red armor covering his entire body.

It was the form of a colossal berserker, the heretical mark etched unto his forehead.

“A Blood Pact member...!” Beside Zeed, who was growling, Riot quietly raised her greatsword to a ready stance. “Zeed, you’ve got to protect Rachel...” Riot slowly closed the distance between herself and the Blood Pact member.

“Welcome to the tomb of our master....”
The shadow that emerged from the center of the former distortion stood well over three meters tall.

“You idiot, are you serious?!” Stunned, Zeed’s expression turned grim. His eyes showed that he had clearly lost composure, glowing with a bloodshot intensity. “You saw that magic just now, didn’t you? If I take a hit like that a few more times..."

"Hmm, you're wiser than you look..." Gates licked his lips as he readied his battle axe. "But just because a strategy is wise doesn't mean it's guaranteed to succeed..." His defiant gaze looked down on the stunned mercenaries.

Faced with that overwhelming pressure, Zeed resolutely rallied his fighting spirit. “I’ll buy you time! Get out of here!” Frantic, Zeed shouted to his subordinates on both sides. “Don’t leave any wounded behind!”

Zeed instantly sent commands to every part of his neural-linked stealth armor. Deployment units embedded throughout the armor projected a three-dimensional image around him. Vanishing in an instant, Zeed pulled out the prosthetic section of his left hand, exposing a silver barrel.

(If I attack from an unexpected angle...) Pinning his hopes on a surprise attack, he attempted to circle around to the side.

But Gates’ gaze had firmly locked onto Zeed.

"Third Strike! Acoustic Trail Tracking!" Ripples spread through space from the Blood Pact member’s finger. Swallowed by the wave, Zeed looked down at himself in horror.

“W-what is this?!” The cry escaped his mouth as red smoke. The sound of his feet striking the sand kicked up yellow smoke. Despite the sound-blocking function being active, every sound Zeed made spread out around him in vivid colors.

"Come at me head-on, mercenary... You may hide your form, but you cannot hide your sound."

“Enough with your weird tricks!” Zeed deactivated his stealth function and bared his fangs at Gates. He raised his ultra-high-pressure charged particle cannon, zeroing in on the Blood Alliance member. “Don’t get too cocky just because you can use magic!” As he roared, magnetically accelerated, super-high-temperature plasma surged from Zeed’s arm. The flash raced toward the Blood Alliance member in the air, writhing as it went.

"You're one presumptuous war puppet!" Gates streaked through the sky, his massive form twisting with agility. The plasma strike that missed him struck the cliff on the opposite shore, unleashing a deafening explosion.

“He… dodged it…!” Above Zeed, who could hardly believe his eyes, Gates flashed his battle axe.

"Fourth Strike! Frozen Rock Hardened Projectile!" Cutting through the clouds, countless objects plummeted down. Resembling a black comet, they trailed long tails and flew in a zigzag pattern. The black objects, each about the size of a person, were clearly targeting the mercenaries.

“Get back! It’s magic!” No one reacted to Justice’s shout.

The mercenaries, who had finally managed to escape to the shore, were completely exhausted. With no energy left to react, the black comet struck them head-on. Screams erupted from all around.

“W-what the—!” One swift strike hit Zeed squarely in the chest. The moment it struck, the Black Comet crumpled into a pulp. Its core appeared to be a mass of slime. The scattered slime clung to the upper half of Zeed’s body, which had been knocked down by the impact. And then...

“What is this...” Zeed looked down at himself and shuddered. As if possessed by a will of its own, the slime began to move, wrapping itself around his body. It displayed a stickiness akin to melted candy, hardening before their very eyes.

Under its weight, the trapped mercenaries let out anguished cries. “Captain! Help us, Captain!”

“Ridgeway! Walker!” But Zeed himself was unable to move, and could do nothing but struggle.

“What a disgusting technique!” Riot shouted, and immediately afterward, a spell struck the ground at her feet.

Justice, clutching Ilsie, dashed behind a large boulder. “It’s high-level restraining magic!” Justice said, noticing the warning glow on her Holy War Staff. “And to be able to use this many at once... Gustav, over here!”

The giant magic hound also grabbed Rachel by the collar as she writhed in pain and leaped behind the rock in a single bound. But even as this happened, the stream of those being restrained showed no sign of stopping, and the banks on both sides were filled with screams.

“Help us, Captain!”

“I see. There are about twenty of them. That will do for now. With this many sacrifices, my master will be pleased.”

Justice bared his fangs in rage at the smiling Gates. “Sacrifices, you say!”

Those trapped in the black slime eventually began to float into the air. Struggling and thrashing, they were all drawn toward Gates. Even from within the muddy torrent, those who had lost consciousness were carelessly hoisted into the sky.

Gazing at the prey gathered in the air, Gates wore a satisfied smile. "From here on, this is our Lord’s sacred land. The toll is steep." As Gates snapped his fingers, the mercenaries were sucked one after another into a dimensional distortion.

“C-Captain!”

"I shall take these lot as living offerings..." Ignoring their screams, he continued to capture the struggling mercenaries.

Zeed’s body, too, floated about two meters into the air. No matter how much he twisted and writhed, he could not resist the power of magic. “Damn it! What the hell is this?!”

“Zeed!” Riot lowered her greatsword to one side and stepped forward, trying to break the spell. But before she could, a silent giant had already reached Zeed.

“Bulk!”

Zeed and Riot shouted in unison.

The shaven-headed heavy spearman hurled his spear aside and scooped Zeed’s body up in midair. Putting all his strength into it, he began pulling him back down to the ground.

“Bulk, stop! Just run away!”

Ignoring their cries, Bulk dragged Zeed down with his log-like arms.

At the sight, the Blood Sworn let out a loud, raucous laugh. "I see. So your men value you that much..." Gates swiftly repositioned his battle axe in both hands. Murderous intent surged from every part of his body. "But defying my master is unforgivable, human..." The moment he flashed a sinister smile...

Powerful magical energy erupted from Gates’ entire body, blazing crimson. The force pushed back the wind, blew away the muddy torrent, and sent sand and dust swirling. In the instant everyone flinched from the overwhelming pressure, Gates leaped forward.

"It is laughable to defy the avatar of a God!" He swung the battle axe raised by his powerful arms and brought it crashing down at Bulk with blinding speed. But two flash grenades hurled from the side exploded right before the Blood Oath’s eyes.

“The Battle Armor Demon!”

The battle axe, having cut through the air, plunged into the ground with its remaining momentum.

Without a word, Riot stepped in front of Bulk.

“A sword fight is exactly what I want!” Gates quickly raised his battle axe, attempting to sweep the Battle Armor Demon aside. Riot met the blow with her greatsword. But as sparks flew, she dodged to the side.

(It’s too heavy. I can’t do this!) The shock of the collision still tingled in her hands. Still gripping her greatsword, Riot deliberately stepped back to create distance. (If I take that head-on, even this sword won’t hold up!)

“You think you can run away after just this?” But the blade struck his shoulder guard and was deflected with a high-pitched clang.

(It really is tough!)

“This is just a scratch, Battle Armor Demon!” Laughing wildly, Gates pressed forward - but swirling flames struck him from behind.

With its gray fur bristling, the demon dog Gustav had joined the fray.

“You discarded little mutant!”

Gustav deftly dodged the furious battle axe. To help him retreat, Riot pulled out the prosthetic part on her left arm and unleashed a barrage of 5.56mm rounds in a single breath. The fire-spewing full-auto fire met Gates with two hundred bullets.

(Just buy us some time, just a little time... Then...)

Behind Riot, who was praying, a small shadow darted out. Ilsie leapt out from behind a rock and dashed toward Zeed.

“Magic Removal!” The girl, clutching the rare gemstone amethyst in her right hand, extended her left hand toward Zeed. A faint holy light flowed into the hardened magical slime. As the magical bonds began to break, the slime became fluid once more. Gradually, the curse loosened.

“Ilsie, you…!”

“Please channel your strength from within!” To the astonished Zeed, Ilsie made her request in a pained voice. “With my power alone, this magic…”

Ilsie shouted, beads of sweat pouring down her forehead. Even though it was a pseudo-healing miracle, its execution still required a high degree of mental concentration. Prolonged use took a severe toll on her body. Even so, Ilsie showed no sign of stopping the magic removal. Bulk, too, refused to let go of Zeed’s body.

"So the little wench is a Purification Officer, huh?!" Gates realized this fact as he exchanged blows with Riot. "How dare a mere pebble like you act so cocky!"

“Ilsie, run!”

Enraged, Gates knocked Riot’s sword aside and leaped forward.

Gustav, who had clung to the massive battleaxe, was slammed into the ground with brute force.

“Run, you two!”

Seeing Gates charging toward him, Zeed steeled himself for the worst.

But behind the Blood Sworn, a blond-haired boy was finally closing in.

“Justice, you...!”

“Miracle Amplification ready! Second Strike!” Justice, who had delayed joining the battle until the very last moment, was storing immense holy light within his sacred seal.

At that voice, Gates turned around and finally realized Riot’s scheme. "You were just buying him time, you puppet!"

“Divine Inferno Strike!” As he shouted, ancient sacred characters surrounded Gates at a speed too fast for the eye to follow. The band of characters enveloped the Blood

Pact member from head to toe without a single gap, then erupted in a burst of flame.

"Gaaaaah!" The flames of the God of Creation consumed Gates's body, armor and all. Whether the blow severed the magic's sustaining power or not, Zeed's body collapsed to the ground.

"I-it's broken?!"

"Not yet, but almost!" Noticing the loosening of the curse, Ilsie intensified her concentration even further. "If I act now, even my power might be enough!" Gritting her teeth, she channeled a faint holy light into him.

But as if to brush away the relentless barrage of flames, Gates swung his battle axe. Faced with that extraordinary resilience, Justice turned pale.

"I-it's not working?!" At those words, Riot shuddered as well.

She had bought enough time for the Miracle Amplification. It was supposed to be the decisive blow - but Justice, having exhausted his reserves, was already on his knees. The intense fatigue from the Miracle Amplification had instantly stripped the boy of his strength - and even as his entire body was engulfed in flames, Gates swung his battle axe sideways, slicing right through the encircling barrier of ancient sacred script.

"Holy Warrior!" Gates, engulfed in flames, raised his battleaxe above Justice's head. His burning eyes were already at the peak of frenzy. "The price for defying my master is high—!"

"Justice, run…" Riot aimed the tip of her greatsword at Gates and charged in from the side. But before he could act, a massive shadow loomed before Justice.

"Bulk!!"

Riot and Zeed shouted in unison.

The spearman, who had sprinted forward, threw himself into Gates's charge with his bare hands.

The Blood Oath member let out a roar and slammed his battle axe down. "Get out of the way!!"

"B-Bulk!" As Justice looked up, dark, viscous blood rained down over his entire body.

The battle axe that struck Bulk's shoulder shattered his scapula and sank halfway into his chest.

Gushing blood sprayed out like a fountain.

"Bulk!!" Unable to move, Zeed let out a scream for his comrade.

But Bulk remained silent, gripping the battle axe embedded in his body with all his might. Even Gates looked stunned by this unyielding display.

"Y-you… what are you—!" His gaze, which had been about to speak, finally locked onto Riot. The battle-armored demon, gripping her greatsword, had heightened her visual acuity to the maximum, scanning the Blood Oath-sworn's entire body thoroughly. In an instant, her gaze located a seam in the thick plate armor.

"Get away from Bulk!" Riot swung the tip of her blade upward. The blade of holy bronze Zodanium plunged deep into the Gates' right armpit.

It pierced through the gap in the armor with ease, the single stroke reaching Gates' flesh. "Gaaaaah!"

“I’ll be taking this arm!” She drove the strike deeper, then swung the blade through as if throwing him over her shoulder. Riot’s forceful slash flew out from Gates’ body, simultaneously severing the Blood Oath’s right arm at the shoulder.

"Riot!!!" Letting out a cry of rage, Gates fell backward, writhing in agony - but the figure clutching the battleaxe with one hand vanished into the depths of the dimensional distortion, accompanied by a grating screech. The single arm left behind sizzled and evaporated.

And Bulk’s massive body slowly sank into the sand.

“Bulk! Bulk!” Finally free from his bonds, Zeed crawled toward his comrade. He shook his blood-soaked chest and clasped his enormous hands with both of his own. “You idiot, why did you do that! Answer me, Bulk—”

“Bulk! Bulk!” Pushing through his exhaustion, Justice also approached the giant’s body. The boy tried to form the sacred seal for a third miracle. But the spearman lying before him had already exhausted his allotted lifespan.

“B-Bulk”

“Stay with me, Bulk! Bulk!” Hugging the corpse, Zeed burst into tears.

Ilsie, too, was speechless, merely watching the giant’s death from the sidelines.

Sighing, Riot sheathed her greatsword and walked over to Rachel, who was hiding behind a rock.

“E-everyone... everyone, Riot...”

“Bulk is gone.” With detached calm, Riot delivered the news of his death. “And the rest of the men have been taken away too...”

“Ah,” Rachel covered her face and sobbed. Tears welled up at her own weakness.

The demon dog Gustav began licking her sorrowful cheeks incessantly.

“...We can’t beat him...” Riot squeezed the words of frustration out of her throat. “...Even I... Even Justice...”

She repeated the words in a whisper, as if to a torrent that had lost its momentum.

【Chapter 4: Zozwell / Reclamation】

It was a space of pure white.

Towering endlessly high and stretching endlessly wide, the place seemed infinite. There were no walls, doors, or furnishings of any kind. Yet, undeniably, that space was a single room.

A pure white universe. If such a thing existed, this space would be it.

Suddenly, a single, brilliantly white sphere appeared within that universe.

“I would like to propose a discussion of my own…” The white sphere called out to the surrounding void in the voice of a wrinkled old man. “An incident that cannot be overlooked is occurring within the territory of Atlas.”

As if in response, several spheres of light floated up around it. Gold, silver, red, blue, yellow, green, black, purple, and gray—each light possessed its own distinctive color.

Finally, a rainbow-colored sphere and a sphere that constantly shifted colors appeared.

The twelve spheres faced each other, forming a large circle.

“Do you mean the one in the Zoana Desert, Your Holiness the White Pope?” The silver sphere asked in a gentle, feminine voice. "It’s been confirmed that the Demon General Olog Zei has been resurrected…”

“A General-rank?” The red sphere muttered, sounding disheartened. “This isn’t an issue serious enough to warrant all twelve of us gathering for a discussion. Leave it to those on the ground.”

“If only that was the case…” The white sphere shared its thoughts with a wry smile. “A report has come in from the Holy Church of Dallas, closest to the front lines. To prevent the resurrection, the Pilgrim Crusader Justice has headed toward the ruins of Zozwell...”

"Hmm..." Amid the murmuring group, the golden sphere calmly conveyed its thoughts in a youthful voice. "It seems that one is deeply entangled with fighting the Evil Spirits. How many times has this happened now.."

"He's certainly got the strength for that. He successfully defended the Zodanium mines in our Saxony." The black sphere asserted with a dignified voice. "We should leave it up to him."

"His Holiness the Black Pope has a surprisingly lenient view..." From the side, the yellow sphere issued a warning in the voice of a middle-aged woman. “The evil spirit that he fought is still merely a Count-rank. He doesn't have a miracle possible of slaying a General-rank in his possession. As for granting permission… among us…”

“That’s right. We have not reached a consensus.” As if indignant, the white sphere once again projected its thoughts. "But the Holy War Officer closest to the scene is Justice. If he can prevent the resurrection, I would like to ask you all once more for your permission. Permission to grant a higher-level miracle..."

A moment of silence followed. Then, commotion arose.

"His fate has not yet been decided. It is too soon."

"No, the time for concern has already passed. Let us entrust it to him."

“I’d like to hear the basis for that judgment. What is your argument?”

Then, suddenly, the rainbow-colored sphere trembled and shimmered. The other spheres fell silent all at once.

The rainbow-colored sphere surveyed the assembly and spoke in a pure, feminine voice. “...This, too, is fate... We should watch over him for a little while longer. Him...”

The spheres began to calm their own boiling thoughts.

And once more, the rainbow-colored sphere radiated its thoughts. "But we must believe. In him... as he undergoes his trials..." Having said that, it fell silent.

The assembly grew still, and their gazes began to converge on a single sphere.

On the one and only being that had never spoken a word, nor shown even the slightest sign of wavering.

Toward the ever-changing, multicolored sphere...

Sunset rapidly plunged the surroundings into darkness. Beneath a starless night sky, as if defying the passing black winds, a long spear stood planted in the earth. It was a silent gravestone, fitting Bulk.

“May he rest in the warm embrace of Saint Roka...” Justice made the sign of the cross with his holy seal, then sprinkled water from his canteen onto his spear.

Ilsie, who was making the sign of the cross right beside him, offered a prayer and sprinkled holy water as an offering to the dead. The water droplets, imbued with the power of the rare gemstone amethyst, flickered with a faint light in the darkness.

Riot simply stared at the backs of the two of them for a moment.

“I couldn’t do it, could I…?” Muttering sadly, Justice turned to face his partner. “There was nothing I could do with my power. Is that… the difference in strength…?”

“They’re thinking the same thing. They’re just as frustrated as we are.” Riot moved her lips without taking her eyes off the gravestone. “That Blood Pact member, Gates… He really lives up to his reputation as a user of the Demon General’s magic. Our usual methods won’t stand a chance against him.”

“Will we have to fight him again?" In response to Ilsie’s question, the Battle Armor Demon nodded slightly.

“Yes, as many times as it takes... until one of us runs out of strength.”

The young Exorcist gazed at Justice with concern. Even Justice’s miracle must have seemed like an unbelievable power to someone seeing it for the first time - but Gates had shattered that miracle and slain Bulk.

Seeing Justice’s fate mirrored in that death, Ilsie hugged her trembling shoulders. “If you think it’s impossible, then maybe we should just stop here…”

“No, even if it’s impossible, we’re going to Zozwell. Everyone’s being held captive there.” Justice shook off his sense of desolation and replied resolutely. “That bastard intends to use everyone for the ritual to revive the Evil Spirit. If we dawdle, it’ll be too late to fix things. We have to hurry and save them. But…”

“Yes, we’ve pinpointed the location.” Noticing her partner’s gaze, Riot offered a smile. “I tracked Gates’s magical energy patterns, so I’m certain of it. He’s in Zozwell... That said,” Riot cut herself off. “I don’t know exactly where he is. We don’t have any map data for Zozwell.”

“Zozwell used to be a thriving city. I imagine the urban area is quite large.” Ilsie said this, pointing toward the horizon that had vanished into the darkness. “I think pinpointing his location should be our first priority...”

“If we get lost there, it’ll be like wandering right into the enemy’s lair. In that case...” Riot let out a deep sigh. “We absolutely need a magical line detection function more precise than mine. Zeed has one in his arsenal.”

At those words, Justice and Ilsie shifted their gaze. In the shadow of a rocky hill a short distance away, the light of a campfire was already visible.

Zeed’s back, visible from there, had remained small for quite some time.

By the campfire, Gustav lay sprawled out, looking completely at ease. The demon hound, perhaps exhausted, was fast asleep. Rachel kept stroking its neck, as if to soothe the fatigue of battle.

"Even if we can save just one person… let's go rescue them." The houndmaster repeated her plea to Zeed once more. "Everyone believes the captain will come. If we don't go help them, they'll all become prey for the Evil Spirit."

"I know that… I know…" Clutching his spear as if clinging to it, Zeed stared intently at the campfire.

Countless weapons and ammunition were laid out around him. They were the meager supplies they had desperately salvaged from the truck that had sunk into the muddy torrent. But there was no fighting spirit in Zeed's eyes, and his gaze remained fixed downward. "I know, but… I can't beat them. I can't save those guys!"

"And how do you know thay?"

"Because I got curbstomped today!" He tossed a dry branch into the fire and squinted at the crackling flames. "It wasn't even a contest… My strength… ...and my strategies too..."

"Well, that's..." Rachel stammered awkwardly. She didn't have any strategies up her sleeve either.

Beside the silent dog handler, Zeed bit his thumbnail in frustration. "I'm thinking too... about how to save everyone... But what on earth are we supposed to do..."

"What?" Rachel cast a concerned glance at Zeed's troubled expression - she has never seen him like this.

"But anyway, we have no choice but to go. Everyone's waiting for us."

"Yeah, but I can't afford to fail again." Zeed grabbed a handful of sand, his frustration laid bare. "If I fail, they're dead. But even when I try to come up with a plan... Bulk's face as he died... it keeps flashing before my eyes." He flung the sand he'd grabbed onto the ground behind a rock.

The mercenary captain stroked the micro-guided missile lying in the sand, recalling the way his comrade had died. "It's my fault he died... Why did he... why did he..." Zeed ran his fingers through his disheveled black hair even more frantically.

Just then, the sound of footsteps on the sand grew closer. Riot, greatsword on her back, sat down beside the campfire.

"Riot, listen..."

"Bulk was thinking of all of them, I'm sure." Gently cutting off Rachel's words, Riot spoke.

At those words, Zeed slowly raised his gaze. "Thinking… of who?"

"Of everyone who was captured. He probably thought that if he could at least save Zeed, the others would be saved too…"

"That can't be…"

"He was a mercenary, too. He must have been able to figure that much out." Riot reflected calmly and pulled the pot of black tea toward her. "That's why he saved Justice, too. He was a good mercenary..."

"What do you know about it?!" Zeed grabbed Riot's arm and shouted. "I've known him for a long time! We've always gotten along great! What do you know about Bulk?!"

"Then… you should understand his final thoughts." In a calm voice, Riot tried to reason with him. "The more you know… the harder it is, I suppose."

After a moment's pause, Zeed finally went limp, as if giving up. A small phrase slipped from his lips along with a heavy sigh. "Yeah… you're right… He was a good mercenary…"

Riot poured some Shiron tea into a cup and slowly sipped the first mouthful.

Just then, Justice and Ilsie returned to the campfire.

“We don’t have much time, Mr. Zeed.” Sitting down beside Gustav, Justice began. “Our only means of transportation is on foot. It’ll take about six hours to reach Zozwell. I’m thinking we should get a few hours of sleep now and then set out right away.”

“Are we going to Zozwell...?”

In response to Zeed’s question, Ilsie nodded vigorously. “Zozwell is the root of the problem. Once the Evil God General revives after receiving the sacrifices, there’s nothing we can do on our own anymore. So, we must prevent the resurrection itself.”

“Well, that’s the Holy Church’s view of the situation.” Sipping her black tea, Riot forced a smile. “From Zeed and the others’ perspective, their comrades have been captured. Their goal is simply to rescue them. Asking them to go as far as defeating the Evil Spirit is just asking too much.”

“No, but...” Hearing his partner’s words, Justice shook his head. “Even for me, the odds of winning against a Demon General are slim. In the worst-case scenario, we'll just do our absolute best to rescue everyone.”

“But even in the worst-case scenario, we’ll still rescue the hostages, right?” Riot looked down at the small Justice with a pleased expression. “Then what about the best-case scenario?”

“Of course, we’ll defeat the Blood Pact members and prevent the Demon God’s resurrection...” Justice smiled innocently as well and poured black tea into his cup. “As for me, I’d definitely like to see that happen.”

“That’s a convenient outlook. I like it.” The two of them raised their cups to their lips in unison.

But standing before them... “Why do you two... think you can just go off to save them so easily?”

Justice’s eyes widened at Zeed’s question. “Huh? Well… it’s because we want to help, of course.”

He said it as if it were obvious. But Zeed shook his head. “I want to help too — they’re my comrades! But… we don’t stand a chance, do we?”

“That might be true.”

“They aren’t even your comrades, so why…” As Zeed continued to press her with further questions, Riot gave a slight smile.

“Because I want to help.” Riot repeated the same answer as her partner and set her cup down on the sand. “You… are afraid of failing and losing another comrade, aren’t you?”

“What did you say?!”

“If that’s not it… then you’re afraid of losing again.”

“Riot, you—!” Holding back Zeed, who was about to lunge forward, Riot continued.

“Aren’t you afraid of losing again in front of everyone? Personally, I don’t mind that… as long as it’s better than not going to help.”

Zeed froze in mid-air. The mercenary captain’s anguish, as he bit his lip, was painfully evident to Riot.

That was precisely why Riot’s red eyes flashed with a fierce light. “...I don’t think you need to hesitate.”

“Where are you going, Riot?”
At those words, Zeed instinctively looked away.
Riot stood up with a sigh of resignation and brushed the sand off the hem of her coat. “I’m going to take a look around. I’m tired of talking.” With that, she flung her dirty cloak behind her. “I’ll stay awake until we leave, so everyone else can go to sleep.”
“Come on, that’ll just wear you out, Riot!”
But ignoring Justice’s voice, the Battle Armor Demon leaped over the rocky terrain. “It’s fine. I’m a Battle Armor Demon, after all!”
“Riot!” Ilsie called out as well.
But Riot had already vanished into the darkness of the night.
All that remained was an unnatural silence.
In the midst of it, Zeed stood alone, tormented by his own inadequacy.

“...Why... why doesn’t he blame me, this guy...” Even after midnight, Zeed kept feeding dry branches into the campfire. Ahead of him, Justice and Gustav lay sleeping side by side.
Looking at the sleeping face of the boy, who was breathing quietly, Zeed let out a self-deprecating smile. “Riot’s the same. I didn’t accept their plan... I forced my way here. Because of that, everyone got captured, and Bulk ended up dying...”
“It’s not your fault, Captain.” Rachel took a sip of her third cup of Banjil coffee and stated firmly. “Even if we’d taken a different route, we might have been ambushed anyway. You’re overthinking it.”
“You feel the same way, don’t you, Rachel?” Zeed suddenly smiled at his second-in-command. “You don’t blame me for my mistakes. Why is that?”
“W-well, that’s because...” Rachel roughly ran her fingers through her flowing blonde hair.
Seeing her confusion, someone smiled from across the campfire. “Everyone knows, you know. That Mr. Zeed is a kind person.”
“Ilsie...” Zeed turned his gaze toward the young girl. It seemed Ilsie had no intention of sleeping tonight either.
Hugging her knees, the girl slowly opened her mouth. “I know you’re kind to your comrades... so even if they did get captured, they know that you’ll definitely come to their rescue... even Mr. Bulk... felt the same way.”
“Me, kind? Don’t be ridiculous!” Zeed said, glaring at the Exorcist girl.
But Ilsie’s words didn’t falter. “You earned a lot of money to protect everyone. That’s a form of kindness, too. Because you were working so hard for someone else, I’m sure Lord Justice and Lady Riot didn’t really blame you.”
“But...”
“Are you going to throw that feeling away... right now?” Ilsie asked him directly.
“Huh?”
“You were fighting for everyone, weren’t you? Are you going to stop that fight right here?”

At that question, something stirred within Zeed. The years he'd spent as a mercenary flashed through his mind in an instant. What he saw there weren't the hardships of battle... but the smiles of his comrades.

(I want to get those days back, no matter what... For that, I'd...)

Zeed suddenly turned his gaze back to Ilsie. He looked at the young girl who had hired him with fresh eyes. Ilsie, who had always maintained a resolute demeanor, and asked her.

"Was it the same for you, Ilsie? When you paid me even after your mother was killed... because you trusted me too?"

Ilsie recalled a moment she had long since buried in the depths of her memory and smiled faintly. "Perhaps..."

Zeed fell silent.

He felt ashamed of himself for not having noticed how everyone around him was feeling. He used to notice. There had definitely been days when he and his comrades trusted one another.

But those happy days...

(I...)

Then he turned to face the only comrade left by his side. "I'm sorry, Rachel..." Saying this, Zeed placed his hand over hers.

"Don't worry, Captain, I knew that you weren't yourself at that moment."

"I'd forgotten. About you guys..."

Confessing honestly, the Houndmaster clasped Zeed's hand tightly. "The Captain I know is a kind person. But the one who killed Ilsie's mother… didn't seem kind. He wasn't the Captain I knew." And she tightened her grip on his hand. "But it's okay now….. You've gone back to being the Captain I know….. the usual Captain…"

With that thought etched in his heart, Zeed pulled a small metal box toward him with one hand. Inside lay a mountain of contract papers that had escaped the floodwaters. He gathered them up and tossed them into the bonfire, laughing off the flying sparks. "I was so caught up in these promises that I forgot the one that really mattered..." After burning every last contract, he looked down at Justice beside him. "I've got to thank this guy, too... I feel so much lighter now..." Seeing the innocent, sleeping face, Zeed couldn't help but relax his own expression. "Fighting without hesitation, for someone else's sake... You've shown me what I'd forgotten."

"It sounds simple, but it's not something just anyone can do."

"Yeah… even though he's risking his life to save my comrades… I actually suspected a guy like that of being a Blood Oath member…" Gripping Rachel's hand, they nodded to each other.

But Ilsie moved her lips, hesitating slightly.

"But… it seems there's some reason behind this suspicion around Lord Justice."

Without thinking, Zeed and Rachel's faces tensed.

"Hey, you can't be serious, can you?" "No way, this kid would never…"

"No, I don't think he's Blood Oath-bound either. But…" Ilsie stroked Justice's blond hair, which was blowing in the wind. "It's understandable that people would

suspect him… It seems he's carrying a heavy burden. I don't know what it is, though." Ilsie knew of the tears Justice shed while struggling with the use of miracles - and she also knew of Riot, gently embracing those tears… She could not detect even the slightest hint of insincerity in their feelings.

"So… are you going to help him?" Rachel asked, her voice trembling with fear.

"To prove that he's a Holy War Officer, he's using our comrades…"

"I don't think that's it either. Lord Justice is simply… a kind person. He's not the type to act out of such calculation."

"Yeah, he's clumsy in how he lives his life. But…" Smiling, Zeed stroked his chin. "Justice has no doubts. He believes the path he's on is the right one. I guess Riot trusts that too - otherwise she wouldn't follow him." The mercenary captain gazed into the darkness in the distance and muttered. "Riot is a legend, she's feared for a reason - once she was even called the Man-Eating Dragon. She must have led a life just like mine - but he's not like that anymore."

"Is that because of Justice?"

"Probably. I don't know the whole story, but…" Zeed nodded deeply in response to Rachel's question. "...There's no doubt between them. No matter what happens... they'll always be able to trust each other. Just as they always have..."

"Me too... that's how it is." Rachel clasped Zeed's hand tightly once more.

Zeed didn't want to let go of that warmth. That warmth was what mattered most to him.

"..." Blushing as she watched the two of them gaze at each other, Ilsie slowly stood up. She wrapped her cloak around herself and walked away to a distant rock shelter.

Feeling grateful for her presence, Zeed pulled Rachel close. He kissed her lips lightly, as if just touching them. Rachel stiffened for a moment, as if startled. But after pulling away and looking into each other's eyes...

This time, as if clinging to him, she pressed her lips against Zeed's. Zeed, too, held Rachel tightly, as if devouring her. Something she had forgotten was sobbing in his arms.

The wind was growing even fiercer.

A gale lashing the earth from the side welcomed the intruders with an eerie howl. Battling against that crosswind, Justice finally reached the summit of the ridge.

"W-w-what... is this...?" His voice cracked at the sight below.

Riot, who had finished the long trek, stood beside him and, for a moment, couldn't believe her eyes. "Is this... the ruins of Zozwell?" She muttered, scanning the area left and right to take in the grandeur of the sight.

Far below the steep slope, a collapsed circular defensive wall loomed. That wall, which had withstood years of wind damage, must have once formed the outer perimeter of the city of Zozwell - but upon closer inspection, the wall's surface was densely crisscrossed with veins of blood in garish colors. In places, pus-filled sores, swollen and thick, clung to the surface. Each was at least five meters across. The pulsating pus would occasionally burst, dripping thick, yellow mucus. The foul stench of the steaming mucus had reached us all the way here. Furthermore, within the ramparts, countless structures stood haphazardly. Of course, these were not the

work of humans. Painted in mottled reds and blacks, they were all strangely twisted. Their appearance, which completely rejected any notion of geometric beauty, was enough to drive the beholder mad.

From between the buildings, countless trees stretched upward into the air. It was unclear whether they were even plants. Things resembling seaweed with cilia had grown to heights of twenty or thirty meters, swaying gently in the black wind.

It was all utterly nauseating.

"Is this the city of the Evil God?" Behind Justice, Ilsie shuddered.

The young Holy War Officer gripped his staff tightly and swallowed hard. "...I can't say for sure, but probably." Justice, too, narrowed his eyes, trying to take in every detail of the scene. "There are almost no records of what the other dimension where the Evil Spirits dwell looks like. Maybe we're catching a glimpse of that otherworldly realm."

"What a sickening sight, though." Riot looked away for a moment and clicked her tongue. "It's almost as if the whole town is alive."

"No, really… it *is* alive." At Justice's words, both Riot and Ilsie were speechless.

There was no mistake in Justice's insight as a Holy Warrior. Fear began to squeeze the very depths of their guts.

"W-what on earth is this…!" A moment later, Rachel's scream echoed through the valley.

The demon hound Gustav already had his fur bristling and was growling menacingly deep in his throat.

Rachel, looking down at the town, swallowed hard. "I won't make it back alive, will I… really…"

But Zeed, who had caught up to her, gave her shoulder a light tap. "Don't think like that. Just don't stray from me." The mercenary captain was carrying a large backpack on his back. He set it down for a moment—filled with weapons and provisions—and smiled at Rachel as she looked up at him. "I'll get everyone out of here, no matter what. Their families are all waiting for them in Dallas."

"Yeah, you're right…"

Riot watched the two of them gazing at each other out of the corner of his eye. "You're full of determination, but what's the outlook? What's the situation inside?"

"They're definitely alive… I think. I can't think of any other explanation. But…" The mercenary captain looked out at the streets of Zozwell, yet spoke with no particular emotion. "If they're alive, that means there's life in that city. So we just need to cut that life off." Zeed said this matter-of-factly and looked at Riot. "Every life that is born must eventually die... I pray that law applies to the Evil Spirits as well."

"I understand. I'll start praying with all my might right now, too." Riot smiled at Zeed, as if to calm her own heart.

There was already no hesitation in Zeed's eyes. The mercenary captain looked down at the city and drew a long spear made of Zodanium from his back.

"I sent a weak scanning wave into the city. Thanks to the wave's reflection, I've got a pretty good grasp of the internal structure."

"So, what's it like inside?"

“It makes me sick. It’s like looking at internal organs. The corridors are packed tight, like intestines.”
Riot grimaced at that description. “So, where are we attacking from?”
“Our goal is to rescue the hostages. First, we need to pinpoint their location. To do that...” Zeed exhaled softly. “...We’ll strike right at the heart of the city.”
At those words, Justice and Ilsie bit their lips.
Riot calmly weighed the plan. “Huh...”
“There’s a space on the north side where all the corridors connect. Let’s hit that spot. Ideally, we’d get some information on the hostages. Even if we don’t, paralyzing the central hub will buy us time.”
“Impressive. To come up with that in such a short time.”
“I don’t want to stick around. I think a hit-and-run is ideal.”
Riot nodded reassuringly at Zeed. Justice listened to the explanation with a pleased expression. Zeed had already regained the strength of a battle-hardened mercenary captain.
“But what if we’re intercepted by the Blood Pact members? Do you have a plan?”
“I have… I have a plan for that.” Justice answered Ilshi’s question quietly. “Even if we can’t defeat those Blood Pact members or the Demon God, I intend to buy us enough time to escape.”
“I’m counting on you, young master.” Zeed said this in a voice filled with warmth, unlike before. “They probably don’t intend to fail twice. There’s a chance they’ve set some kind of trap to finish us off this time. I’m done with traps, too.” The mercenary captain’s sly smile returned.
A sense of certainty had returned to Zeed’s voice.

"They’re moving surprisingly fast, aren’t they..." Noticing the approaching intruder, the woman’s thoughts wore a look of mild surprise. "Well, if Gates’s wounds haven’t healed yet, I suppose I’ll have to meet them head-on. I suppose that will settle things…" As she spoke, her thoughts twisted violently.
The previously invisible thoughts materialized before her eyes into the woman’s naked form. A long purple robe clung to her pale, bloodless limbs as if it were a living thing. As she let her blue hair flow out in all directions, the woman’s heretical crest on her forehead glowed coldly.
"Perpetual Watchtower Network..." The woman - Iglia of the Blood Pact, activated all the auxiliary magic scattered throughout the city.
The moment she did, hundreds of mirrors began to surround the darkness around her. The cluster of mirrors, forming an equilateral triangle, each reflected a different image.
“Now then, where will they come from... The interior of Zozwell is entirely in my hands... If they had enough imagination to catch me off guard, it would be worth fighting them...
"And behind her..." A mind writhing in intense agony appeared, spreading fury. "So you’ve come, Iglia and the rest... I’ll make you atone with your own hands for the sin of reducing me to this state.... .." The thoughts of the Blood Pact member Gates

were consumed by a fury so intense it seemed to drive him mad. Even the arm severed by Riot had already nearly regenerated.

Iglia looked down upon that rage with cold disdain. "They haven't infiltrated yet. Don't get impatient... If they prove too much for me to handle, then it'll be your turn. Until then, focus on recovering."

"Don't boss me around!" Gates roared, his impatience laid bare. "Do you intend to grab all of Lord Olog Zei's favor by killing Justice yourself?! You bitch..."

But the woman did not even bother to face his anger. She calmly pointed to a single image displayed before them. "I have been entrusted with the command of Zozwell's defense. This is my Lord's will. You are to perform the ritual of resurrection alongside the 'Servant.'" And with detachment, she smiled at the impending situation. "I wish I'd had just a little more time... Really... It seems the Holy Warrior who bears destiny also possesses good fortune..." For some reason, Iglia spoke in a tone that sounded almost sympathetic. "Of course, if that weren't the case, I wouldn't have been saddled with this fate...

"Nor would I have been subjected to this ordeal..."

There was a living presence in the darkness above. The overwhelming presence gazing down upon Iglia and Gates still lurked there.

"Get back!" As soon as Zeed shouted, he unleashed a barrage of shots from the ultra-high-pressure charged particle cannon on his arm. The plasma blasts, with their terrifying initial velocity, struck the flesh-colored wall one after another - as the wall split open, sending up plumes of steam, the entire building seemed to writhe in agony. But heedless of this, Zeed leaped boldly into the interior of the Zozwell structure.

"Riot, cover the flanks!" He scanned the area to his left and right, then shouted to the Battle Armor Demons following behind him. "I'll take the lead! Keep your distance and follow me!"

Riot gripped the massive Zodanium Greatsword in both hands and quickly scanned her surroundings.

The interior of Zozwell truly resembled the viscera of a living being. Blood vessels ran across the walls, and the slimy, cell-like floor pulsed with a throbbing beat. Yet, without a hint of fear, Justice and Ilsie plunged right into the thick of it.

"Zeed, please don't stray too far from us!" Seeing the Holy War Staff already flickering red, Justice cried out in panic. "The Rare Gem can only block magic over a short distance! If you get too far ahead, you'll fall outside the protective range! Prolonged exposure to magical contamination is deadly!"

"But if we just stand around, we'll all get wiped out together. And you, don't use your miracles recklessly either!" Saying this, Zeed checked their direction. "Save your miracles as a trump card for when we face the Blood Pact members! Until then, we'll handle things!"

"I'll cover the rear!" Rachel, gripping her dagger, appeared at the rear with Gustav in tow. "If we protect you, we should be able to win!"

At those words, Justice nodded firmly. Riot glanced at the corridors stretching to the left and right, then quickly locked eyes with Zeed.
“Zeed, the direction is...!”
“We’ll go down into the underground up ahead! Don’t stop!”
Gustav let out a battle cry.
The five people and one beast raced into the depths of Zozwell like a single bullet.

"Intruders passing through the fourth intersection of the North Second Corridor in Zozwell. 40 dimensional seconds remaining until reaching the second intersection of the North First Corridor in Zozwell." In the darkness, the images shifted rapidly. Countless surveillance feeds deployed around the mind continued to report in dry, mechanical voices - but every single feed, from multiple angles, had the intruders firmly in its sights.
“I see. Attacking the corridor hub first, then. Not a bad strategy.” Iglia observed the battle situation, maintaining her composure. "The corridor hub is also the entrance to the heart of Zozwell... I won’t let them pass so easily..." Then, stretching both arms out to the sides, she curled her red lips into a smirk. "First strike... Repelling Barrier!"

“What the—?!” And so, Zeed, who was leading the charge, came to a sudden halt.
A thick wall had suddenly risen right before his eyes. It wasn’t just any wall. It was a wall of flesh, slick and glistening with moisture, nearly fifty centimeters thick. Rising up from the floor, it swelled like a living creature growing, fusing with the corridor’s ceiling and walls to completely block their path.
“They noticed us!” Zeed thrust his spear into the top of the wall and swung it down with all his might. The tip of the Zodanium spear seemed to split the wall clean in two... or so it appeared.
“Zeed, it’s a trap!” But Riot had noticed the cunning magical trick.
With an explosion, a crimson liquid spurted from the crack. It splashed onto Zeed’s arm, and with the power of a strong acid, it seared and charred the mercenary captain’s flesh.
“Aaaargh!”
“Captain!” Rachel screamed at the sight of steam rising from Zeed’s arm.
As if to mock him, the tear in the flesh wall slowly closed up. Not even a scar remained on the regenerated tissue.
“Don’t worry, it’s not that much...!” Justice rushed over to Zeed, who was clutching his arm. “If it’s a cold-based offensive miracle, I think I can break through. Let me handle this!”
“Hey, hey, I told you to conserve your strength. You’ve got a short memory.”
“Then are we going back the way we came?” Riot frowned at the pulsating flesh wall and looked back. “This isn’t the only passage to the central core. Let’s take a detour…”
It was just then that she shifted his gaze.
"Iwora Enzei... Izela Zera Zey..." A low growl echoed from behind them.
Rachel readied her dagger, and Gustav rose onto his hind legs.

The center of the narrow corridor warped strangely, and a crimson arthropod emerged from beyond the dimensions.

“Rachel, fall back!” Riot shouted, drawing a pistol from her waist. “That thing’s a Knight-rank!”

With a roar, a monstrous demon leapt out of the dimensional distortion. It moved its ten or so thick, segmented legs with a rustling sound, advancing with the agility of a poisonous spider.

But the part that served as its torso struck equal terror into everyone’s hearts. The torso controlling those legs was the head of a gigantic old woman.

"Izela Zey! Zey! Zey!"

“Evil God Knight Iwora Zey!” As if shielding the perceptive Ilsie, Justice stepped forward.

Rachel threw her dagger and quickly leaped backward. Gustav’s flames provided cover for her retreat. However, the Demon Knight Iwora Zey changed course while bathing in the flames and charged straight at Justice.

“Uwaaah...!” Faced with the demon who seemed unfazed by the fire attack, Justice instinctively reached to form a holy seal.

But Riot had already sprinted in front of the boy. “Back off!!” She swiftly swept her greatsword sideways, then brought it down from above. The Demon God, its face split open in a cross, let out a deafening scream and came to a halt.

“Izela Zey! Zey! Zey!” A glob of mucus shot out with a splat from the trembling old woman’s mouth.

“Ilsie, get down!”

Justice dodged it; it struck the wall and melted into a slimy mess on the floor.

Confirming that the strike contained a lethal dose of magical energy, Justice raised his Holy War Staff.

“Mr. Zeed, what do we do?! We’re being pinned between them!”

“I want to do something about this just as much as you do, Riot!”

But Riot was desperately fending off the Demon God’s limbs with her greatsword.

The Battle Armor Demon, locked in combat with the Demon God, clenched her teeth tightly. “Well mercy me, I don't think I can hold off for much longer!”

Seeing the Demon God’s sharp claws flash, Zeed’s mind raced. “If that's the case…” Gripping his spear in one hand, he once again exposed the ultra-high-pressure charged particle cannon on his arm. “Then I’ve got no choice but to take them both out at once!” Having made up his mind, Zeed aimed the plasma cannon at the Demon God’s mount. “I’ll take care of this one!”

Zeed fired another burst of high-pressure plasma. With a deafening roar, the devastating blasts slammed into the Demon God’s face one after another. As the Demon God let out a scream and charged again, Riot leaped back to the side of the corridor.

“Rachel, get behind that...!”

“Ilsie, hold on to me!” Justice also scooped up the young girl in his arms and fled toward the wall.

With his back against the wall, Zeed stood alone, blocking the path of the Demon God.

"Izela Zay! Zay! Zay!"

“She’s a tough old lady — Rachel will probably be the same in a few years.”
The Evil Spirit’s face, struck directly by the high-pressure plasma, was covered in bodily fluids.
Facing its charge, Zeed once again gripped the Zodanium spear with both hands. “But you’re getting a little annoying, you know!” He charged straight ahead. The two charges collided head-on.
“Zeed!” Riot couldn’t help but cry out at the reckless attack.
But just before the collision, Zeed leaped upward toward the ceiling. He attempted to boldly leap over the approaching colossus. The Demon God swung its jointed limbs to knock him down, but it was too late. Zeed circled around behind the Demon God and swung his spear with all his might.
“Heeeeeaaa!” He slashed down, striking the colossus’s back. The impact was tremendous, and the Demon God lost its balance. But that wasn’t all. Having lost its target, the Demon God couldn’t come to a sudden stop and crashed into the protective barrier at breakneck speed.
“Get down! It’s going to blow up!” Just as Zeed screamed, the entire wall of flesh exploded.
Bathed in a shower of strong acid, the Demon God let out a death cry. The fallen Demon God imploded from within with a deafening roar. That explosion, in turn, blew the entire protective barrier to smithereens.
“Gaaah!”
The blast wave and shockwave raced through the corridor.
After enduring the pressure for a moment, Riot raised her head as the explosion subsided.
Beyond the clearing smoke, Zeed stood, spear in hand.
“Zeed, you…”
“Took care of it. A bit rough, though.” Brushing the soot from his bangs, Zeed said curtly. “We’ve opened a breach. But this is just the beginning, so don’t let your guard down.”
The protective barrier had been blown away along with the Evil Spirit, exposing the corridor ahead.
Justice smiled happily at the result. “Well done, Zeed. Keep it up.”
“I’m having a hard time because I’m holding you back. Come on, let’s go!”
Seeing them smile at each other, Riot let out a sigh of relief.
“What a dependable captain… I’m jealous…”
Ilsie smiled as well, watching his back as he walked away.
Rachel nodded, unable to find the words to reply.

"It seems even the Dark God’s Knights aren’t enough to hold them back..." Iglia shot a cold glare at the intruders advancing through the corridor. "They’re almost at the corridor’s core. But we still have three layers of defenses in place. There’s no need to worry." As she spoke, she regained her composed smile. “As long as he remains within Zozwell, he is as good as mine - but I’d like to watch him struggle and suffer a little longer. That will serve as the eve of my master’s resurrection...” Iglia

summoned her power into the darkness once more. “Second strike... Activate all autonomous magic mines...!”

As Zeed descended the corridor into the underground, he reached a new intersection.
From the junction of the wide corridor, four new corridors extended to the left and right.
Riot, who had caught up behind him, surveyed the entire corridor before asking.
“So, which way do you think we should go?”
“The one on the far left. That’s the shortest route.” Nodding at the navigation data flashing across his retinas, he scanned the area in all directions.
After confirming that Justice, Ilsie, Rachel, and Gustav had reached the intersection, Zeed pointed in the direction they were to take once more. “Once we pass that, it shouldn’t take more than five minutes. Alright, let’s go.”
With that, Zeed tried to cross the intersection. At that very moment…
“Whoa!” The floor beneath his feet erupted in a small explosion.
Something resembling a spiked iron ball shot up forcefully from within the floor.
It bounced up close to Zeed’s face and instantly transformed into a massive fireball.
“It’s a magic landmine!” Realizing the danger, Justice threw himself over Ilsie.
But anti-personnel magic landmines also erupted from beneath Justice’s feet.
The swelling flames reached as high as the Riots’ heads, and a heat wave engulfed the entire group.
“Aaaaaaah!”
“Captain! Zeed!” Beside Rachel, who was screaming, Gustav also roared frantically. But then, a strange protrusion began to ooze out from the wall at the intersection.
Countless flesh-like bulges opened wide mouths lined with sharp fangs.
From deep within its throat, a black shockwave of offensive magic was fired out with tremendous force. “Get into the alley! Quick!”
Pushing Ilsie aside, Justice swung his holy staff wide. He deflected the offensive magic with the rare gem Metolite, causing it to veer off course and strike the walls and floor. Zozwell’s body tissue was brutally scattered.
“Lord Justice, this is reckless!”
“It’s low-level magic, I'm not wasting any of my miracles!” Shouting, Justice deftly parried the furious barrage - but the offensive magic showed no sign of stopping.
Even so, Riot crawled over to the mercenary captain collapsing on the floor and forcibly pulled him close. “Zeed, pull yourself together!”
“...Don’t worry about it. Clearing the way is my job...” All around them, the intercepted magic blasts were exploding one after another. The mercenary captain, who had been blown away, shook his head, trying to clear the daze. “More importantly, don’t go charging in recklessly… Those landmines pack a surprisingly powerful punch…” Zeed’s left shoulder guard had been blown off, and his synthetic skin was scorched.
Riot dragged Zeed into an alleyway and tore off his shredded gauntlet.
Rachel gently stroked his wounded upper arm. “Hey, Captain, you really shouldn’t push yourself anymore!”

“If I don’t push myself, I can’t save everyone… But going on like this…” Zeed poked his head out of the alley and looked toward the wide intersection in the distance.
The suppressing fire hadn’t stopped yet.
Justice gave up and dashed into the narrow corridor. “What do you say? Should we go around?”
“Nah. If the defenses are this tight, it’s proof there’s something further in.” Zeed straightened his posture, stroked his chin, and said that. “But if we go in slowly, searching for landmines every step of the way, we’ll just be wasting time…”
“I think that’s exactly what the enemy wants.” With that, Riot looked up at the walls all around them.
All over the surrounding walls, eerie, swollen veins ran crisscrossing. Their pulsing movements were astonishingly fast. And at various points along those arteries, she could see exposed white spheres glistening with moisture.
(Are we being watched...?) Realizing this, Riot checked the pattern on the walls once more.
The spheres were always connected to arteries and appeared to be receiving some kind of nourishment. Just as she noticed the network spreading throughout the entire Zozwell... “Zeed, transfer your navigation data to me.”
“Huh? Why so sudden?”
Riot pulled a connection cable from her waist and plugged it into the back of his neck. Zeed quickly connected that cable to his own universal connection port.
“You’re still stuck with that transfer speed? At that rate, to send all the data...”
“It’s fine, just this area... Here. Just as I thought...” After confirming the location of the urban corridor displayed on her retina, Riot shifted her gaze. “Ilsie, I need your help.”
“M-me...?”
“What do you mean, Riot?” Justice tilted his head, and Rachel shrugged.
But Riot looked up at the wall once more and slowly continued. “This Zozwell city is sick, I'm afraid… so I’m going to use your power to heal it completely.”
Hearing the cunning tone in her voice, everyone struggled to hide their confusion.

"Zozwell 144, confirmation of magic circuit network disconnection. Zozwell 158, confirmation of magic circuit network disconnection." At the sudden report, Iglia let out a sharp, angry shout. "Nonsense! I gave no order to disconnect! Why did you sever the surveillance magic circuits!" But despite her voice, the surrounding surveillance feeds faded away one after another.
The mechanical reports also increased with every passing second. "Zozwell 171, magic circuit network disconnection confirmed. Zozwell 160, magic circuit network disconnection confirmed."
Amid the relentless stream of reports, the woman vented her anger. "What is happening? Report! Switch to the backup surveillance magic circuits. Route the intruder’s footage here!"
But just as the Blood Alliance member showed signs of panic for the first time, another mechanical report came in.

"Foreign object detected in the surveillance magic network. Network being neutralized at a rate of 200 dimensional units per minute. Surveillance magic tracking intruders: current count zero."

As if awakened by that voice, the darkness began to breathe deeply. The surrounding darkness flickered red as he exhaled with apparent agony. 'N-Gazei... N-G-Olog... Iriiri, Olog-Zei..."

"My Lord, this cannot be..." At the voice of torment, the Blood Alliance member trembled with fear. “That can’t be! There’s no way they have that kind of power...!” But just as the Blood Alliance member’s rage was reaching a boil, another report reached his ears.

“Intruder’s voiceprint detected in the central corridor... confirmed entry.”

He pulled a large grenade from his back and hurled it toward the intersection. Immediately afterward, Zeed skillfully shot it down with his ultra-high-pressure charged particle cannon.

“Get down! It’s going to blow up!” The moment he shouted, the fuel vaporization bomb thrown at the intersection’s ceiling exploded.

Flammable fuel was scattered throughout the intersection and ignited instantly. The entire junction of the corridors was blown away by a massive fireball.

“Aaaaaaah!” A whirlwind of flames leaked out from the intersection and spilled into the corridors. Overwhelmed by the force, Justice, who had been hiding in an alley, let out a scream.

“This isn’t the time to be scared—let’s go!” Zeed bolted out and sprinted back toward the intersection.

Riot, following close behind, witnessed the devastation firsthand. The shattered intersection had completely lost its floor, exposing the lower-level corridors beneath.

Along with the countless magical landmines that had been set there, the intersection had been obliterated without a trace.

“We’ve got ourselves a huge shortcut now.”

“Yeah, this should bring us closer to the heart of Zozwell... I’m heading ahead!” With that, Zeed, spear in hand, leaped down to the lower level.

“Wait up, Captain! I’m coming too! Gustav!” Rachel called out, lashing her whip against the smoldering debris. Skillfully wrapping her safety rope around it, she quickly followed after Zeed. Naturally, Gustav was hot on their heels.

After seeing off the two humans and one beast who had gone ahead, Riot turned to look behind her. “Ilsie, we’re done here! We’re heading down too!”

The girl nodded, holding both hands out toward the corridor wall. The holy light overflowing from her hands was the power granted by the rare gem, the emerald.

The arteries on the wall, bathed in the holy light, withered and dried up before their eyes. Moreover, the effect spread through the arteries in an instant, shattering even the surveillance magic. “I never knew I had such a destructive power...” Ilsie was surprised by the unexpectedly effective nature of her magic.

Justice nodded as well, his gaze fixed on the crumbling wall. “That’s way too powerful to be just rare gem healing. The power that infiltrates living bodies to scan and remove magical circuits is trying to devour the city of Zozwell. The power of rare gem healing uses the removed magical circuits as fuel to enhance its removal capacity and diffusion speed. Since this place is absolutely swarming with magic wires, there’s no shortage of nutrients to consume.”

“Come on, let’s go, both of you!” Riot hurried over and scooped Ilsie up in her arms. Still holding her, the Battle Armor Demon rushed toward the floor that had been blown away. “Hold on tight, got it?”

“Y-yes...”

“Wait, Riot! Am I supposed to jump down?” Justice, scrambling to catch up in a panic, looked down at the lower levels and shuddered. “This is pretty high! Why’d you send Gustav down first?!”

“He’s not my dog, so I don’t know! Bye!” Cutting through the wind, Riot descended into the abyss.

Justice, gripping his staff, hesitated for a split second before taking a bold step forward. “Ugh! How is this supposed to be ‘conserving our strength’!?” Screaming, he plunged into the heart of Zozwell.

The sharp fangs awaiting him there were even more merciless and vicious.

【Chapter 5: Zozwell / Showdown】

The air was thick with the acrid smell of burning fuel.

The central corridor, its ceiling smashed through, was filled with Zozwell's charred remains.

Sinking knee-deep into the debris, Riot scanned her surroundings. (There's an incredible amount of magic wire here—the readings are off the charts... At a rate like this, we wouldn't even notice an attack by a Demon God or a Blood Pact member.)

She set Ilsie down from her arm and supported the little girl's small body.

Justice had already caught up behind them. "Riot, which way are we going now?"

"First, over there." Without a moment's hesitation, Riot pointed ahead. "Zeed is checking it out right now. With his scanning abilities, he should be able to tell us exactly what's going on."

About ten more corridors branched off from the central hub. Zeed and Rachel had already approached the most bizarre-looking corridor among them. A thick stone gate, obvious even at a glance, blocked the entrance to that corridor. The figure of the Demon God carved into the gate was identical to the one they'd seen at the Holy Church of Dallas. Realizing this, Ilsie gasped.

"So, the evil god Olog-Zei's…?"

"Well, this whole city is his home, after all. I'm not surprised at this point." As the three approached, Zeed placed his palm against the door and heightened his detection capabilities.

"Can you sense it too, Gustav?" Zeed asked the demon hound, which was baring its fangs. "There are countless life signs ahead. A large number of humans… and a large number of something else."

At the commander's words, Rachel pressed her lips together. "So, everyone's there, then?"

"I don't know. The mass feels human, but their body temperatures are low. That doesn't mean they're dead, though. Weak as it is, I can hear their heartbeats from here. But I'm not exactly eager to go in."

Smiling, Zeed turned to Riot. "I can hear squelching sounds and some incomprehensible language coming from in there."

"We'll just have to check it out. We'll figure out what to do after that."

Nodding, Zeed pressed his shoulder against the double doors. Using all his strength, he forced open a small gap and slipped inside, keeping the area silent.

Riot and the others followed, moving through the darkness behind Zeed for a while. Beyond the door, the temperature dropped sharply. From the feel of the ground beneath their feet, they knew they were in a natural cave. Rocks blocked their path in places.

But before they had advanced even a minute...

"Look, Riot..." Huddling behind a rock, Zeed pointed ahead.

At his voice, Riot, and Justice and the others, all turned their gaze in the same direction.

Instinctively, everyone held their breath.

Riot enhanced her night vision and began scouting. The vast cavern was about 100 meters wide and perhaps 30 meters deep. Countless stalactites hung from the ceiling, and stalagmites jutted up from the floor.

At the very far end, about twenty white objects were lined up in neat rows. Each was about two meters long and cone-shaped, seemingly made of some kind of thin membrane. Since their contents were faintly visible, they resembled cocoons. But Zeed's intuition was correct - inside the cocoons were mercenaries, still clad in their armor. Not a single one moved a muscle. They stood upright inside the cocoons, maintaining a military "attention" posture.

(They’re keeping them in pretty good condition, aren’t they...) His relief lasted only a moment.

At the same time, the group realized the presence of something even more terrifying.

Riot, fighting back nausea, stared intently at the scene. (If this is a nightmare, I wish I’d wake up right now...)

Countless creatures were writhing around the cocoon. Long necks extended from green bodies the size of humans.

At the tips of those necks, thick, withered petals hung limply, as if in bloom. The petals opened and closed repeatedly, as if breathing. And as they crawled through the cave on four short, thick legs, they were absorbed in some kind of task.

“Are those… Evil Gods…?”

Zeed shook his head at Rachel, who asked in a trembling voice. “No, the magical energy output is way too low for that — it’s only in the double digits. That’s below even the lowest class of Evil Gods, the Servant-rank. What on earth are those?”

“It’s a ‘Servant,’ no doubt about it…” Justice answered with certainty. “They serve mid-tier or higher Evil Gods… they’re known as ‘Servant Evil Gods.’ They’re likely involved in maintaining the life of their master, the General-rank one.”

“Even so, this is the first time I’ve seen one… what on earth are they doing?”

“Probably managing food supplies…”

In response to Ilshi’s question, Justice stated with a serious expression.

When the "Servants" drew close to one another, they pressed their petals together and whispered in an incomprehensible language. Was licking the mucus oozing from their bodies also a form of communication? Several of them extended thin, dreamlike arms from their torsos. At the tips, they lit what appeared to be magical flames and began etching bizarre patterns onto the cave walls. Occasionally, they let out cries of “Kwoo” and “Kwoo” and snapped their tentacles together.

“It’s creepy how strangely human they seem...” Riot muttered, her face turning pale. “From their perspective, maybe we look like that too...”

“Even if it’s a joke, it’s not funny. Anyway, let’s go.” Zeed stowed his spear on his back and instead gripped an electromagnetic knife in each hand. “Their combat ability doesn’t seem like much. Riot and I will take care of them. Justice and Rachel, wait for the right moment and rescue everyone.”

“Understood.”

“Leave it to us, Captain.”

Smiling at the two as they nodded, Zeed turned back to Ilsy.

“Ilsie, secure an escape route with Gustav. There’s a small passageway at the far left. Once Justice and the others break through, head that way.”

“Where does that passageway lead...?”

“Don’t worry. According to my analysis, we should be able to get outside just past one intersection.”

“I’ll rush over immediately if anything happens. It’ll be fine.”

Ilsie responded to Rachel’s words with a deep breath and stayed close to the demon hound.

Riot also gripped her greatsword with both hands and exchanged a deep nod with Zeed.

“Alright, I’ll take the left!”

"I’ll take the right!”

With a single exchange of words, the two Battle Armor Demons burst into the Great Cavern.

The moment their shadows appeared, several "Servants" let out screams.

“Move it!” Riot closed in on the "Servants" and, as she passed them, swung her greatsword. The thick blade sank into their massive bodies, cleaving them in two with a single strike.

Weaving through the spray of green bodily fluid, Zeed also dashed off in a different direction. “These guys are more fragile than I thought!” Letting out a roar, he swung his electromagnetic knife with lightning speed without mercy, slicing and dicing two “Servants” in the blink of an eye.

But Riot shouted a warning to Zeed, who was getting too close.

“No, wait — it looks like they’re just getting started!” Immediately after the warning, the "Servants" began swarming around the two of them.

Countless tentacles sprouted wildly from their green bodies. As the tentacles entwined, they pulled each other’s bodies closer. With a squelching, grating sound, the bodies of the Servant Demons gradually fused together.

“This is bad! The magical energy emissions are increasing!” Sensing the change, Riot boldly slashed at the swelling bodies. “These aren’t just low-level minions!” Riot’s greatsword confirmed her suspicion. The blow sliced diagonally through the grafted spirit’s torso, but their skin had thickened, and their resistance to holy steel had increased.

Emitting a shrill scream, the fused servant demon god swiftly lashed out with a whip-like appendage.

“So this is their combat mode, huh!”

The whip shattered the stalactites and shook the ground. It targeted both their faces and their feet simultaneously. It displayed a surprisingly clever tactic. Nearly ten heads, screaming in unison, closed in on the two Battle Armor Demons with a ferocious advance.

“Blow it away!”

“That’s the best move!”

Zeed and Riot stood shoulder to shoulder and pulled out their prosthetic arms together.

The ultra-high-pressure charged particle cannon and the 5.56mm compact Gatling gun opened fire simultaneously. The pursuing "Servant" let out a bloodcurdling scream and writhed its massive body.

“We're coming too, kid!”

“I’ll follow you, miss Rachel!” Lowering his stance, Justice followed behind the houndmaster.

Darting past the flinching “Servant,” he frantically grabbed hold of the white cocoon.

“I’m going to save you now! Hang in there!” As he called out, the boy thrust the tip of his Holy War Staff into the top of the cocoon. He swung the stone tip, which had split the white cocoon, all the way down in one swift motion.

And from inside the cocoon, a gush of transparent liquid poured out. Preservation fluid, perhaps? But paying no heed to the wetness at his feet, Justice frantically shook the unconscious hostage.

“Hang in there! Stay with me!”

“Hey, Walker! Wake up!” Beside her, Rachel was also slashing open the cocoon with her dagger. When she slapped the pale cheek of her captured comrade, the color gradually returned to his face.

“Walker! Wake up, Walker!”

“...R-Rachel...” The mercenary groaned and staggered violently as soon as he opened his eyes.

Supporting him, Rachel shouted into his ear. “We’re here to save you! Stand up straight!”

“Where are we... We... w-what the hell is that?!" His sleepy eyes finally caught sight of the "Servants", and the mercenary let out a dramatic scream.

After slapping his cheek again, Rachel pointed to the other cocoons. “We’re not out of the woods yet! Hurry up and escape through that passage over there!”

In the direction she was pointing, Gustav was roaring with all his might.

Behind him, Ilsie was swinging a small nightlight. “Over here, everyone! Hurry!”

Suddenly, the tide of battle was beginning to turn against the intruders.

"Rescue request from the food storage. Life signs of eight "Servants" lost. Surveillance magic still tracking intruders: zero confirmed. At the report delivered in an emotionless voice, Gates let out a furious shout.

“It seems this is beyond your capabilities, Iglia! How dare you let the living sacrifices meant for Lord Olog-Zay escape!"

But the blue-haired Blood Alliance member stood up resolutely. "They haven’t escaped yet! They’re still inside Zozwell! Even if they’ve rescued them from the cocoon, there are still plenty of ways to take them back!" However, a sense of urgency was clearly evident on her face.

The magical surveillance network had already been destroyed by Ilsie’s power. The healing effects of the rare gem had permeated every corner of Zozwell.

“N’Gazei… N’Gaolog… Iriiri, Olog-Zei…”

The moans were growing louder and more agonized. It was proof that the resurrection, which should have been proceeding smoothly, was being hindered by something.

"The power that tore through the magical network is moving faster than expected. At this rate, it’s only a matter of time before it reaches the dimensional gate at the deepest level."

Gates’ face twisted in horror at Iguria’s calm statement. "Then Lord Olog-Zay will also..."

The two blood allies stared at each other, terror etched into their eyes.

Iglia fixed her gaze firmly on Gates and spoke in a voice she had forced out. "Ah, even Lord Olog-Zay will not be able to be resurrected..."

“Yes, he will likely fall into a long slumber once more.”

“And thus, our power will vanish from this world as well...” Then Iglia muttered, as if spitting out the words. “We underestimated those intruders too much... We shall bury them in dust with our own hands!”

“Aye!” Gates replied, gripping his battle axe tightly in both hands. "This time, I’ll take that brat’s head!" With a roar, he vanished into the depths of another dimension.

But Iglia pinched her sharp chin, deep in thought. "Their trump card is that Holy War Officer... If we can just seal Justice’s movements, victory will fall into our hands... And to do that..."

Iglia, seething with rage, began summoning a new magic into both arms.

"Third Strike..."

“Zeed, dodge!” Riot raised her sword in front of her face.

The “Servant,” now right before them, aimed its many heads at the Battle Armor Demons - and from the tips of its pinched petals, it began firing offensive magic like a rapid-fire cannon.

Magic resembling black cannonballs struck the surrounding walls and floor indiscriminately.

“Where the hell am I supposed to dodge to?!” Zeed was showered with shards of shattering stalactites and instinctively flinched.

But Riot couldn’t afford to retreat either. Behind her, Justice and Rachel were in the midst of rescuing the mercenaries from inside the cocoon. She swung her greatsword frantically, knocking down the incoming magic attacks.

“Justice, are you almost done?!”

“Hold on, just two more!” Lending a shoulder to a rescued mercenary, Justice shouted, his voice rising above the explosions. “Everyone’s exhausted! Hang in there until we reach the escape route!”

“There’s a limit to how hard you can push yourself! Isn’t this enough already?!” Gasping for breath, Zeed shouted at Riot.

“Let’s have Justice use a miracle spell That’ll send this guy to the afterlife!”

“You’ve got to be kidding! On a weakling like this?!” Undeterred by the relentless attacks, Riot roared back. “If I start crying over something like this, it’ll be a disgrace to the name of all Battle Armor Demons!” Suddenly, she kicked off the ground, dodged the barrage of magic, and charged toward the "Servant". Ducking low to evade the tentacles’ counterattack, she slammed his greatsword into its seemingly ponderous leg.

“Don’t be reckless, Riot!”

Body fluids spurted noisily from the Evil Spirit’s wound, trying to drown out Zeed’s screams. The "Servant", joining in the chorus of screams, lost its balance and collapsed against the wall.

“Hah! Being reckless is my thing!” Riot switched the greatsword to a reverse grip and thrust the tip into the Servant’s back. The massive blade sank nearly a meter into the Demon God’s body. Ignoring its convulsions, Riot sliced the Servant in two in one swift motion.

The fragile flesh that touched the holy metal blade exploded, and the Demon God's body scattered to the ground.

Unfazed by the impact, Riot smiled with satisfaction. "Well, we're done here! Everyone's waiting — let's go!"

"O-oh..." Zeed was dumbfounded by her reckless tactics, but Riot paid him no mind. Turning on her heel, she dashed straight toward the escape route.

"Captain, thank goodness! We took care of the hostagea!" Hugging Rachel as she threw herself at him, Zeed nodded.

Around them, the mercenaries were still gathered, looking dazed. Though weakened, the mercenaries clung desperately to Zeed.

"Captain, I... I'm so happy..."

"I never thought you'd actually come…"

Seeing his subordinates even shedding tears, Zeed's face softened for a moment. "You idiots, I'm your commander. Of course I'd come… Anyway, let's get out of here."

Zeed took a bottle from the backpack he was carrying and handed it out to his comrades. "We're not out of the woods yet. As soon as you can walk, keep moving down this corridor. Don't relax until you're in bed with your wife waiting for you in Dallas."Amidst sighs of relief and laughter, the mercenaries drained their bottles of water mixed with nutritional supplements.

"Looks like we'll manage to escape after all. That's a relief for now."

Watching this out of the corner of her eye, Riot shifted her gaze to Justice.

"Yeah... I'm really glad..." For some reason, Justice was shedding tears. Ilsie was startled by the sight of his profile.

"Oh no, Lord Justice, you're crying..."

"Hehe... I guess so... I think I just got caught up in the moment." With a shy smile, Justice wiped his tears with his sleeve. Riot ruffled his hair gently. She was the only one who understood the meaning behind Justice's tears.

(I've managed to conserve my miracle this far... If it's like this, I'll be able to handle it even if that Blood Pact member shows up...) Normally, Justice didn't really think much about conserving his miracles. If it meant saving someone, he would use every last ounce of his power without hesitation - but Zeed and Riott had protected him and rescued the hostages.

Grateful for their sacrifice, tears welled up in his eyes, and a sense of relief and joy at being able to fight alongside his comrades with all his might welled up inside the boy.

"Now it's your turn. I'm counting on you."

"Yeah, I know…" Sniffing back his tears, Justice suddenly raised his Holy War Staff. "Thanks to Ilsie, the concentration of magical energy around us has thinned out. Because of that, I can now tell where the magical energy is still lingering strongly, even with my staff."

The Holy War Staff had been glowing red until just a moment ago, but now it had regained its blue holy light.

Riot nodded in understanding while keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings. "So, what exactly are you talking about?"

“I figured it out. There’s a dimensional gate beneath this ruin. It’s a gate connecting the dimension of the Evil Spirits to this world. A massive amount of magical energy is leaking out from there.”

“And the Evil God General Olog Zei is surely trying to resurrect himself using that energy…”

Justice and Ilsie pressed their lips together, their eyes blazing with determination.

Realizing the shared resolve between the two, Riot nodded quietly. “I understand. You mean to destroy that dimensional gate.”

“If we destroy it, it’ll be the end for both the Evil God and the Blood Pact. Let's go.”

It was just then the voice rang out.

"If you do that, then I'll lose my Blood Oath powers..." A familiar voice echoed through the cave. At the same moment, Justice’s Holy War Staff glowed red. "No matter what it takes, I will end your lives! Flame Curse Wave Slash!"

“Riot!” Following Justice’s voice, the entire corridor shook violently.

Along with the tremor, a crescent-shaped offensive magic formation plummeted from the ceiling.

“I won’t let you do that!” Riot slashed through the stalactites, which seemed to reach all the way to the ceiling.

The collapsed, massive stone pillars fell directly into the path of the magic. They collided and exploded.

“Rachel, take everyone and run!” Re-raising his spear, Zeed shouted urgently. “At the next intersection, take the far-right passageway up! That’ll lead you outside!”

“But — I want to fight too…!” The moment Rachel’s face twisted in horror, the end of the corridor began to visibly warp.

"I won’t let you escape a second time! You’ll pay for your actions in the Sacred Tomb with your life! Geaaaahhh!”

Raising his battle axe overhead, the Blood Pact member Gates leaped out of the dimensional distortion.

Zeed met his charge head-on. Swiping the battle axe aside with the tip of his Zodanium spear, the mercenary captain instantly activated all combat functions. “Take this!” With a loud bang, the protective panels on Zeed’s upper arms sprang open.

What emerged was a compact anti-personnel grenade launcher. Riddled with countless holes, it scattered pea-sized grenades in a radial pattern toward the rapidly approaching Gates.

"Nothing but child’s play!" Pushing through the blast, Gates charged forward fearlessly. “You’re not hiding anymore, mercenary! Is that all you’ve got? Pathetic!”

At those words, Zeed calmly retreated. “If my stealth function won’t work on you, then I’ll use a different approach!” Seizing a brief opening, Zeed pulled out his left prosthetic arm. “At this range, you won’t be able to dodge it!”

From point-blank range — close enough to touch noses — Zied unleashed a barrage of ultra-high-pressure plasma. The bluish-white flames of the impact burned through the Blood Alliance warrior’s armor with blinding intensity - but Gates paid no heed, slamming his massive battleaxe into Zied.

“I won’t be outdone by a mere machine!”

“Guhhh!”

“Captain!”

The massive blow hurled Zeed into the cave wall. The impact caused his retinal display to flicker out for an instant.

Screaming, Rachel swings her whip, trying to give orders to Gustav.

But before she can, Riot rushes to the front lines. “Just go, Rachel!” She slashed at Gates with her greatsword and screamed. “You normal humans will be of no help now!”

The greatsword and battleaxe collided head-on. Blocking Riot’s strike, Gates flashed a smirk. "Truly so! In fact, it was a mistake to set foot on this sacred ground in the first place! Atone for the weight of your sin with your own blood!" Gates pushes Riot aside and prepared to launch another strike - but Riot, too, hurled a fire grenade to block his advance. Gates’ armor is blown away, and he staggers back a few steps from the impact. Just a few steps...

There is truly no room for human intervention. Rachel grits her teeth in frustration.

“Justice, can’t you do something?!” Rachel, gripping her whip, glanced over her shoulder. “Use your power...!” She fell silent after saying that.

Justice had already formed the sacred seal, closed his eyes, and begun preparing to amplify the miracle.

(I believe in your plan, Justice... For that one moment of yours... I’ll buy as much time as it takes!) While desperately trading blows with Gates, Riot waited for that moment. She poured her resolve into her sword strikes, desperately enduring Gates’ fierce onslaught.

As if answering Riot’s prayer, Justice’s eyes snapped open.

“Miracle Amplification Ready! First Strike...” It was just as the boy was about to aim the Holy Seal at Gates that the Blood Ally shifted the angle of his battle axe and glared at Justice with vicious eyes.

"Let's see if that miracle can defeat these fools, Justice... Second Strike!Battle Mutation!"

“No way!” Justice sensed Gates’s magic and halted the summoning of the miracle.

Black lightning began to coil around the Blood Pact member’s fingertips, and Gates’s gaze was clearly fixed on the mercenaries. "Become my servants, you humans! Defeat the intruder!" Ilsie clung to Justice’s back.

The magic that had driven her mother mad was now about to manifest right before her eyes. Rachel realized this too and shouted frantically to those around her. “Run, everyone! If you get hit by that magic...!”

“It’s too late. Your lives belong to me now!”

“Rachel, run! First strike!” In a panic, Justice quickly reformed his holy seal - but before he could, the black-haired battle-armored demon pounced from behind Gates.

“Zeed!”

He grabbed Gates’s right arm—which was imbued with magic—and twisted it in an unnatural direction. Maintaining that stance, Zeed smiled at Justice. “Don’t use it in a rush — that’s a precious miracle!”

Holding Gates back with all his might, Zeed discharged a massive surge of high-voltage electricity from his fingertips. “Cast Miracle Amplification! I’ll buy you some time!”

“You—!” The flash of electricity Zeed unleashed illuminated Gates’ face with a pale blue glow - but the Blood Oath member tossed aside his battle axe and clamped his free left arm around Geed’s wrist. "I hate tricks, especially from enemies! Fine! Then I’ll turn YOU into a Mutant Beast!" With that, he summoned a new magic spell into the arm with which Zeed held him back.

Instantly, black lightning began to coil around the mercenary captain’s arm.

“Run away, Captain! No!” Rachel screamed at the sight. “I don’t want the captain to become a mutated beast! I don’t want to see it — run away!”

But even as his face contorted, Zeed smiled at the hound handler. “You’re a fool too, Rachel… I’m your captain, after all…” Yet green spots gradually began to appear on Zeed’s arm.

He was transforming the same way that Ilsie’s mother, whom he had slain, did. Even so, without letting go of Gates’s arm, Zeed shifted his weight onto the ground. “Get out of here now! I don’t want to see you guys change either!” Then, he swung both arms up with ferocious force. Zeed fired two blades from each wrist, one to the left and one to the right. “Thermonuclear Fusion Blades! Go!”

"Gaaahhh!" The sharp blades, accompanied by intense heat, sliced off several of Gates’ fingers, but the Blood Pact member, though reeling and losing his balance, attempted to channel a new magic into his arm. "Shatter into dust... Third...!"

“Like hell I’ll let you!” As he shouted, a Zodanium blade pierced Gates’ body.

The tip, which had entered his back, now protruded from his solar plexus. Gates stared down at the glint of the blade in disbelief. "I-it can’t be! When did you—!〉

Gates squeezed out a voice filled with regret toward Riot, who had circled behind him.

Riot looked up at the Blood Oath member and twisted her greatsword deeper into him. “I don’t think it’s worth telling you now...” Then, a new impact pierced Gates’s abdomen.

Zeed’s spear had pierced deep into his entrails. “This is for Bulk... I’m going to take that, at least...” Pushing the spearhead in with a sharp thrust, the mercenary captain raked through Gates’s insides.

Zeed’s keen eyes had accurately spotted a tiny seam in the sturdy armor. Gates staggered and collapsed, but his eyes were still brimming with fighting spirit.

“Do you think this is enough to end me, you fool...!”

“This isn’t the end, Justice!” Calling out her partner’s name, Riot forcibly shifted the direction of the blade that had pierced through.

“Show me what you’ve got!”

“I’ve bought us plenty of time. Now it’s your turn!”

At Zeed’s words, Gates’s gaze wavered involuntarily.

"What on earth...!"

“Miracle Amplification Ready! First Strike!” Finally responding, Justice roared the command. The boy, who had been concentrating his thoughts for this very moment, thrust the Holy Seal forward with all his might. “Sacred Blazing Downfall!” From the tips of Justice’s fingers, ancient sacred characters streamed forth in a line, accompanied by a blinding flash.

The miracle split into two in midair, first striking the tip of Riot’s greatsword.

Immediately afterward, it coiled around Zeed's spear with a thud.
It was a sight akin to lightning striking a lightning rod.
The strike, which traveled through the blade in an instant, mercilessly tore through Gates's body.
"Gaaaaaah!"
A tingling shockwave also traveled up through Riot's arm, gripping the greatsword.
Right before her eyes, Gates's body was blown apart from the inside out. He coughed up a mouthful of blood and collapsed to his knees, as if all his strength had left him.
Ilsie clutched the rare gem at her chest and called out the name of the one who would never return. "Mom… Mom…" Having finished the summoning, Justice also collapsed to his knees. But even in that position, Gates desperately reached out his fingerless hand toward the two Battle Armor Demons.
"I'll… I'll take you both with me…" With a groan, Gates exposed countless black claws from his arms. In place of his lost fingers, he raised them toward Riot and Zeed.
"You're one persistent bastard!" Riot quickly drew her greatsword and tried to retreat - but Gates' claws were a split-second faster, reaching the Battle Armor Demon's right ankle.
Zeed's discolored arms were also caught by those claws. "You're just too stubborn to admit defeat! Fine, I'll give you what you want!" Zeed issued an emergency command to his arms, where the claws were digging in.
"Emergency order confirmed. Right arm, sever all systems. Emergency order confirmed. Left arm, sever all systems. Severing preparation complete. Immediate detonation." The moment that message flashed across his retinas, Zeed's arms were blown to smithereens.
Caught in the crossfire, Gates's arm was blown off as well. "Damn puppet!!" Blown back by the blast, Zeed rolled all the way to the wall.
Gates mustered his last ounce of strength, trying to forcefully pull Riot toward him with his one remaining arm. "I'll take you down with me, at least..." Gates groaned, his face covered in blood, but Riot had also activated her emergency functions.
"Emergency command confirmed. Right leg, sever all systems. Severing preparation complete. Five seconds until detonation." As soon as he read the retinal display, Riot kicked out with his toes.
"How dare you touch my leg!"A sharp blade sprang from the toe of his worn-out boot. A short dagger made of Holy Steel Zodanium, skillfully concealed, pierced Gates's throat.
At the same moment, Riot's right leg exploded with a deafening roar. Everything below the knee was blown away, and Gates's head was engulfed in the flames.
"Riot!"
"Dammit!" Having severed her leg below the knee, Riot rolled to the ground to escape the blast.
Justice and Ilsie rushed over in a panic. "Riot, are you okay?"
"Riot, your leg...!" Rachel looked down to see sparks flying from Riot's thigh. But Riot, her mechanical body exposed, brushed the smoke away with her hand.

“I gave it up. It’s a waste, but... it was a good trade.” Lying in the flames was the charred body of Gates. After witnessing the Blood Oath member’s final moments, Riot clasped Ilsie’s hand tightly.
“I avenged your mother….”
“Yes,” the girl nodded softly.
Justice gently pulled her trembling shoulders close to him.
Meanwhile, Rachel clung to Zeed as he collapsed beside her.
“Captain, your arm… your arms…”
“Don’t worry about it. We’ll just have to rebuild it. That’s how my body works.” Smiling as he stroked her blonde hair, Zeed turned his gaze toward Riot. “It’s a good thing we both have mechanical bodies.”
“Because we can just toss them aside without a second thought…”
The two Battle Armor Demons exchanged a smile after saying just that. The mercenaries also rushed over to the fallen Zeed.
But the moment of relief lasted only an instant.
“What the…!?” Realizing something, Justice stood up.
At the tip of the Holy War Staff, the rare gem Metalite began to flicker with a dull red light. The boy advanced deeper into the cave, scanning the surroundings with a watchful gaze.
“Justice, what’s wrong?”
“Everyone, you’d better run… A powerful presence is approaching.” Without turning his gaze back to Riot, who had asked the question, the boy sharpened his senses as a Holy War Officer. “It’s… much stronger than the one we just faced…”
It was the moment he swallowed hard that it had hit.
"Third Strike…"
Suddenly, a cold, ruthless woman’s voice echoed through the corridor.
"Frostbound Fate Confinement Formation!"
“Uwaaaaah!”
A massive heretical symbol materialized at Justice’s feet. Enveloped by the black flashes emitted by the symbol, the young Holy Warrior convulsed as if struck by lightning.
“Lord Justice!”
"Justice!”
Ilsie and Rachel stood dumbfounded by the sudden ambush. The demon hound Gustav, too, bared his sharp fangs at the new presence.
As if shielding the frightened mercenaries, Zeed — his arms torn off — stood up.
“Fall back! There are still enemies...!”
"Did you think you’d won, Holy Warrior...? But if I let you escape here, Gates would never rest in peace."
At the end of the corridor, a dimensional rift opened without a sound. The distortion in space gradually transformed into billowing blue hair.
From the fissure, a half-naked woman bearing the mark of the heretical sect on her forehead stepped out, smiling.
“It’s… another Blood Sworn!”
Hearing the mercenaries’ screams, Riot couldn’t help but feel a pang of regret.

(There was another one…!) Having traded one leg for Gates, Riot had completely lost her mobility.

As if sensing her desperate calculation, the new Blood Pact member's smile grew even more enchanting. "My name is Iglia. You'd better remember it... For I shall go down in this planet's history as the one who laid Holy War Officer Justice to rest..."

"Gustav, attack!" Rachel lashed out with her whip without hesitation. "Burn that woman to ashes!"

At the same moment, the massive demon hound leaped forward, spewing flames with ferocious intensity - but with a sneer on her face, the Blood Pact member Iglia caught the fiery blast in the palm of her hand. “How laughable... Do you really think such power would work on a member of the Blood Pact? That dog’s power comes from a magical mutation; it has no effect on me.” With that, Iglia formed a seal with both hands.

"Fourth Strike! Rose Swarm Confinement!" Iglia summoned a new magic spell at the mercenaries’ feet.

Shattering the hard stalactites, a swarm of black roses burst unexpectedly from the ground.

“Run, everyone!” Riot’s voice was too late to keep up with the lightning-fast roses.

Unable to flee, they lay prone, trapped by the magic. In the blink of an eye, the thorn-covered vines began to wrap around the mercenaries’ limbs.

The black roses mercilessly sank their thorns into Rachel’s pale skin as well.

“Aaaargh!”

“Rachel, everyone…!” Even Zeed, hearing the screams, couldn’t clear the vines without his arms.

Looking down at their writhing, agonized forms, Iglia scattered scornful laughter. "There are enough of them to serve as sacrifices for the resurrection."

Even as she sneered, the vines kept eruptibg, and Ilsie and Gustav were captured as well.

"Lord Olog-Zei will be quite pleased..." As she spoke her master’s name, the entire Zozwell began to tremble with a fine, crackling vibration.

"N-Gazei... N-Gaolog-Iriiri, Olog-Zei..."

Iglia nodded at her prey. “Well, they’re just humans after all. This is likely their limit.” But at those words, there was one person who resisted.

Ilsie, trapped by the rose, clenched the rare gem at her chest. “Magic Removal!” The moment she chanted it, the vines that had been coiling around the girl were blown to smithereens.

"What?!" Paying no heed to the stunned Iglia, the girl ran with single-minded determination.

Having broken free from her bonds, Ilshi rushed toward Justice, who had collapsed atop the Heretical Crest. “Lord Justice, please stand up!” Saying this, she reached out a hand carrying a faint light.

But her right hand, imbued with the healing power of the rare gem, suddenly crashed into an invisible wall.

“What is this...!”

The Heretical Crest had formed a barrier with a radius of about three meters. Punching the glass-like wall, Ilsie frantically tried to switch to Magic Removal - vut her arms were pulled back from both sides by a new Black Rose’s Dream.

“Aaah!” With her arms outstretched, Ilsie was bound once again. Since she couldn’t reach the rare gem at her chest, using Magic Removal was now impossible.

“You’re quite a surprise, little girl. No wonder you were capable of annihilating Zozwell.” Stepping toward Ilsie, Iglia crushed the girl’s leg with her sharp toe.

“Gaaah!”

“But the price is high. Even if you regret it now, death is inevitable.”

Riot writhed in agony and locked eyes with Zeed. But Zeed, his face contorted with pain, shook his head. Countless red “system failure” indicators were etched across their retinas. The restraining magic had even disrupted the Battle Armor Demon’s combat functions.

And there stood Ilsie alone, fixing a piercing gaze on the Blood Pact member. “If Lord Justice wasn't restrained, you lot would be nothing…!”

"I wouldn’t be so sure of that, little girl." Looking down at Ilsie as she endured her pain, the Blood Ally tilted her head. "It would be childish to think that all my magic did was seal him off... Take a good look at Justice…" At those words, Ilsie, Rachel, and the mercenaries all turned their gaze toward him.

Even through his blurred vision, Zeed managed to make out the figure of the boy.

“Justice...”

As everyone watched, Justice staggered to his feet.

Then, with a dazed expression, he began to look around. “Ri-Riot! Where’d everyone go?!”

“Lord Justice!” Ilsie called out, but the boy didn’t even notice.

Iglia folded her arms and smiled, captivated by her own magic. "It’s useless; he can’t hear me. He is about to... meet his fate..." Suddenly, a red light spread throughout the area.

The backs of Justice’s hands flashed with a dull glow. What appeared there was unmistakably the mark of the heretical sect.

“Justice... that...!”

“No, it can’t be… Lord Justice…”

Rachel, and then Ilsie, let out cries of despair.

Riot was speechless, her whole body trembling. (Justice…!)

Justice himself stared down at his own hands in a daze. “I… these hands…”

Then, suddenly, countless figures appeared around Justice.

“Don’t touch me, Justice! You blood-sworn!”

“Masquerading as a Holy War Officer, of all things! You deceived us!”

Several boys hurled stones at Justice.

Riot was speechless at the sight.

It was supposed to be an illusion created by magic - but when a stone struck Justice’s forehead, fresh blood began to flow down the boy’s face.

“No, I’m not deceiving anyone! I am a Holy Warrior!” Justice shouted desperately, but the boys continued to hurl insults at him.

The Blood Pact member watched Justice, who was covering his ears, with satisfaction. “My illusion is perfect; Justice can't distinguish between what is real and what is an illusion...” Iglia snapped her fingers to give a signal.

This time, men clad in sacred robes appeared above the heretical crest.

“We cannot acknowledge your existence, Justice.”

“A Holy War Officer bearing the Heretical Crest must not exist.”

“Therefore, the Church advises you to take your own life with honor.”

“Return that Holy War Staff to us, Justice.”

“N-No! I won’t do that!” Justice shed tears and clung to the Holy War Staff. “Why won’t you believe me?! I’m not a Blood Pact member! This Heretical Mark isn’t because I made a Blood Pact either!” The distraught boy tried to run away - but one after another, new Inquisitors appeared around Justice.

“You’re a Holy War Officer?! Don’t make me laugh!”

“Don’t touch me with those hands bearing the Heretical Mark!”

“This is for my father’s death, Bloodsworn!”

“Stop… please stop…”

“Die.”

“Die.”

“Die.”

Justice covered his ears and tried to close his eyes - but Iglia’s magic would not allow even that, and the boy stared wide-eyed at the horror before him. "Justice will die here, by his own hand... When faced with an unbearable past, anyone would end up like this... This is Justice’s past...”

Even Zeed, who was groaning, wanted to look away from that torment. Rachel and the mercenaries could do nothing but grit their teeth in anguish.

Then, Iglia calmly stepped into the magic that surrounded Justice. "Fifth Strike... Nightmare Illusion Body..."

“No way...!” Rachel cried out involuntarily.

Iglia’s form, having passed through the invisible barrier, had changed in an instant.

Her blue hair turned red, and leather armor and a grimy cloak appeared on her body. With a greatsword drawn from her back, she was the very embodiment of the Battle Armor Demon Riot.

“What kind of magic is this?!” Even the real Riot herself would doubt her own eyes at the quality of the illusion.

And the fake Riot, still wearing a smile, approached Justice.

“Riot, you…”

“You have no choice but to die, Justice.” In the exact same tone as the real one, Iglia held out her greatsword. “No one believes you’re a Holy War Officer — not now, and not ever…”

Justice listened to those words without even wiping away his tears.

Iglia gently pressed the blade of the greatsword against the boy’s throat. “But if you die, everyone will accept it. Die as a martyr and clear everyone’s doubts. That’s the only way. If you want, then I'll kill you now…”

Justice looked up at the phantom of Riot with tear-filled eyes.

“Riot, I…”

“There’s no one left who believes in you…” The boy lowered his gaze to the dull gleam of the blade. Then, as if mesmerized, he froze.

At that sight, Ilsie let out a scream.

“No! Lord Justice! Don’t be fooled!”

“Riot! The real one! What are you doing?! Justice is…” Rachel, struggling against the Black Rose spell, shouted at the real Riot.

But lying on the ground, Riot kept her gaze fixed on his partner.

“Riot, I…” “There’s no one left who believes in you…”
The boy lowered his gaze to the dull gleam of the blade. Then, as if mesmerized, he froze.

“I… believe in you…” She murmured, as if squeezing the words out of herself. “There’s no way Justice would choose death… We still have so much we want to do… What good would dying do?”

“Ri… Riot…” At those words, Zeed, Ilsie, and the mercenaries all gasped.

But undeterred, Riot hammered home her conviction. “What good is it to die while still being suspected?!” However, the fake Riot, with a sneer on her face, drove her greatsword into Justice’s throat.

“Now then, Justice…” She smiled and nodded. “Just use this sword as it is…”

“...Who... are you...?”

Suddenly, Justice spoke up.

Iglia’s voice trembled slightly. “I am your...”

“No... You’re not... Riot.” Justice gradually regained strength in his voice and began to speak. “...You’re not... Riot. You’re not the Riot I know...”

“What are you talking about? Come on...”

“Who are you?!” Justice let out a sharp shout. The boy shook off his tears and confronted the fake Riot with a powerful voice.

“Riot is on my side! She’s always with me! He’d never say something like that! She always protects me! And you...!”

Mid-sentence, strength returned to Justice’s eyes. “Are a Blood Oath!”

"Dammit!"

As he leapt back, Justice thrust the Holy Seal toward his face. “You’re not Riot! Second strike!”

"No way, that’s too fast!"

“Circumventing Impact Bullets!” Indeed, the miracle detonated right before Iglia’s eyes. Four flashes of light fired from Justice’s fingertips scorched the Blood Pact member’s face one after another.

Justice hadn’t cast any Miracle Amplification, but the close-range impact had doubled the attack’s power.

"Aaaaaaah!" As she screamed, Iglia revealed her true form and fell backward in a pitiful heap. At the same time, the binding magic that had been restraining Justice evaporated. As the heretical symbol at her feet vanished, Justice finally took in his surroundings.

“What on earth is going on… what is this?!” Justice was stunned by the sight of the mercenaries struggling in the Garden of Black Roses. However, the power of that magic began to melt away in a gooey mass while Iglia writhed in agony.

Riot was the first to break free, using her greatsword as a cane to stand up.

“Justice, thank goodness!”

“Ah, be careful, Riot!” The boy hurriedly offered his shoulder to support the limping Riot.

Before the two of them, Iglia swayed and regained her footing. "Do you intend to resist us... to the very end...? Then I shall crush you all to dust! Every last one of you!" Though Iglia’s entire body was engulfed in flames, she clung desperately to consciousness.

Raising both arms, the Blood Oath-sworn cried out into the darkness.

"My Lord! My Lord! Answer me, my Lord!〉

“No way!” Riot and Justice saw the Blood Oath-sworn’s sheer determination in that moment.

"I offer my life to you, along with the life of Gates! Use our bodies as sustenance, and awaken from your long slumber! My Lord, the Evil God General Olog Zei!"

The earth’s surface cracked and shattered with a loud noise, and black steam gushed up from the depths below. The ceiling collapsed, and stalactites tumbled down in a cascade. The violent tremor hurled everyone against the walls and floor, and they coughed violently from the black smoke and heat.

"N-Gazei... N-Gaolog... Iriiri, Olog-Zei..."

“It’s — it’s coming, everyone! Grab onto something!” Zeed, having lost both arms, shouted as he pushed his companions toward the end of the corridor.

Rachel, along with the demon hound, shielded Ilsie with their backs. A warning indicating a powerful magical energy began to flash on Riot’s retinas as well.

Then, from deep within the earth, something enormous burst through the bedrock and emerged.

“Justice, get down!” Riot shielded Justice and dashed behind a rock. Ducking beneath the falling debris, the two stared in stunned silence at the thing that had risen before them.

What had appeared was a gigantic tentacle.

It must have been five meters in diameter. Tentacles thick enough to block the corridor jutted out from the earth, writhing as they entwined with one another. Their tissue was translucent, and the massive tentacles —each likely over a hundred meters long —glistened with slime.

“What… kind of monster is this…!” Riot stared up in a daze at the writhing whip of flesh. Soon, the tentacles wrapped around Gates’s corpse and scooped up Iglia, who was engulfed in flames.

“Oh, my Lord! Please take this body as your sustenance! Please accept this as proof of our Blood Pact’s faith!”

“No…!”

Ilsie looked away and clung to Rachel. The skeletons of Gates and Iguria were snapped by the tentacles, cracking and shattering with a series of pops.

As the limp, slackened bodies were carried away into the depths, a voice of jubilation rang out from somewhere.

"N-Gazei... N-Ga-Olog... Iriiri, Olog-Zei..."

“It’s the Demon God!”

“Everyone, run!”

The mercenaries were thrown into chaos in an instant. Even seasoned warriors were powerless before the Evil Spiri - and they had no weapons, either. The mercenaries scrambled to be first, racing toward the exit.

“Rachel, I’m counting on you to look after Ilsie.” Saying this, Zeed pushed the hound handler’s back. “I’ll definitely follow you. Get everyone to a safe place.”

“I know...” Rachel bit her lip in frustration.

Even though she wanted to stay with him until the very end, there was simply no place for humans in a fight against a Demon God.
With a heavy heart, filled with the frustration of being unable to help, Rachel forcefully pulled Zeed's lips toward hers.
"You idiot! Rachel, not at a time like this...!"
"Just shut up! Come on!" Rachel silenced Zeed's protests with her lips.
Beside a dumbfounded Riot, Ilsie's face turned bright red. "Whoa...!"
Justice, caught off guard by the sudden turn of events, stared wide-eyed from the side.
But once it was over, Rachel turned her gaze to the boy and Riot.
"I'm counting on you to look after the captain."
"I know, don't worry." After confirming Riot's smile, the Houndmaster clasped Ilsie's hand tightly. "Let's go. Don't let go of my hand, okay?"
"Yes, miss Rachel." Ilsie, too, knew that this was beyond her power to control. After making the sign of the cross with the holy seal, the young Exorcist bowed to Justice.
"Please… make sure you come back."
"Yeah. I promise, Ilsie."
Nodding at his words, Ilsie ran off into the crumbling corridor.
With the demon hound Gustav bringing up the rear, Rachel and the others vanished into the darkness.
Relieved, Zeed turned back to Riot.
"I guess that means all the sane people have evacuated now."
"Exactly. The rest is our job, handsome!" Patting Zeed on the chest, Riot turned her gaze toward the edge of the underground fissure.
Supported by Justice and Zeed, she stepped toward the violently quaking crevice.
The moment they peered down into it, all three of them held their breath. Far below the cracked bedrock, there appeared to be a gaping void.
That vast space was packed to the brim with a swarm of transparent tentacles.
"Is this the Demon General Olog Zei…?"
"It seems so… but you'd better check the magical energy output levels carefully."
Without taking his eyes off the scene, Riot said to the mercenary captain. "The readings are still around 500. For a Demon General-class enemy, it wouldn't be unusual to see 700…"
"It hasn't fully revived yet." Justice spoke with conviction. "But he just swallowed Gates and Iglia… the emission levels should be rising soon…" Then he locked eyes with Riott. "We can take him down now, even with my miracle."
"I get it… but I'm going." Riot sat down on the crack in the ground and gripped her greatsword with both hands. "Imbue my sword with your miracle's delayed effect. Then I'll charge in. I'll pierce through its outer shell and detonate the miracle inside its body."
"Don't be ridiculous — what will happen to you then?" Zeed's face turned pale as he looked down at the Demon God. "If the Demon God dies, who knows what will happen to the city of Zozwell. How are you, with your right leg shot, supposed to escape?"

“But you don’t have any arms. You can’t attack, can you?” Saying this, Riot placed her hand on the mercenary captain’s shoulder. “In return, I have a favor to ask. It’s a selfish request, I know…”
“What is it, all of a sudden…”
“I want you to help Justice escape.” Riot tightened her grip on his shoulder.
Zeed looked puzzled, but Justice remained silent.
Sighing, Riot murmured as if making a confession. “Justice is about to use his third miracle. That’s her limit. Once he’s used it, he’ll be completely drained and won’t be able to escape on his own…”
“I get it. I can handle getting him out of here.”
“But, if we do that...”
Riot turned her gaze toward the boy.
Justice, too, was unsure how to explain it.
But Zeed clicked his tongue and gave them both a bitter look. “Don’t start whining now. Don’t you trust me that much?”
“But this kid is…”
“He’s a Holy Warrior, isn’t he? What else do you think he is?”
At those words, Justice’s tense expression eased.
Zeed, too, nodded apologetically at the boy. “No matter what anyone says, you’re a Holy Warrior. I’ll vouch for you. No matter what happens.”
“Zeed…”
“Thanks, Zeed…”
As the two exchanged their thanks, the tremors beneath their feet grew violent once more.
"N•Gazei… N-Gaolog… Iriiri, Olog-Zei…"
Cracks ran across the wall, and stagnant groundwater gushed out with force.
Riot’s gaze darted sharply from side to side, and she nodded to her partner.
“Leave it to me, Justice! At this point, every second counts!”
“Got it... Aaaah!” Justice’s reply was shaken by the violent tremors and turned into a scream.
Zeed also shouted frantically to Riott, who was crouched by the fissure. “This is bad. It won’t wait for us...”
Riot, having been warned, shuddered at the sight below.
Twisting tentacles entwined, rapidly fusing together in the eerie glow. Realizing the materialization was accelerating, Riot stood up on one foot.
“Fall back! It’s coming!”
The ten seconds that followed felt unbearably long.
The earth was thrust upward from deep below, and bedrock was blown away. Boulders slammed into the ceiling and walls, shattering spectacularly. Flying fragments of rock rained down mercilessly on the three of them, and gushing, murky groundwater made their feet slip. Riot’s screams were drowned out by the deafening roar and the impact.
Right before her eyes, Justice lay sprawled on the ground, drenched in groundwater. Even if she wanted to help, Riot heeself was being tossed about by the violent

tremors and slammed against the wall. Having lost both arms, Zeed couldn't even brush away the flying debris; he simply crouched in the midst of the torrential downpour of rocks.

(I'm going to die...!) It was the first time she had ever grasped despair so clearly. Riot, her right leg torn off, was also mercilessly pinned to the ground, able only to endure the storm-like impact. She could not resist the ear-splitting roar of the Demon God.

"N-Ga-Olog Iriiri, Olog Zei……" The voice grew progressively clearer, rising from his feet to his head.

Clinging to the ground, Riot desperately tried to lift his face.

(He's stood up… The Demon General Olog Zei…!)

She opened her eyes and bit her lip, trying to make out its form. But the moment the Evil Spirit became clear in her eyes, Riot could do nothing but stare up in stunned silence.

"N-Gazei... N-Gaolog Iriiri, Olog-Zei...."

The countless tentacles radiating from its body had already shifted into vivid colors. Each tentacle glowed with red spots on a green background, black spots on a red background, and purple spots on a black background. Its appearance certainly resembled the mural he had seen in the basement of the Holy Church of Negros. The gigantic, spiral-shaped demon god that had fought a holy warrior named Saint Paul six hundred years ago.

However, the mural had not depicted its true form. The bases of the tentacles were intertwined, forming a hideously swollen mass of flesh. That was the true body. But standing tall directly in front of that body was the upper half of a gigantic old man.

(Th-that's...) Riot let out a silent scream.

The old man's face was completely expressionless. His deeply wrinkled features radiated dignity, and his vacant gaze simply watched the intruders below in silence. He had no intention of showing any murderous intent toward such pitiable, human-like beings. A transcendent being said to live across a timeline of thousands, even tens of thousands of years.

The truth about the Evil Spirit, which I had understood intellectually, was now shaking my very body to its core. Even if it was a hideous, grotesque, and purely evil entity, it was undeniably a "God."

"N-Ga-O… N-Ga-Olog Iriiri, Olog-Zei…"

"Aaaaaah!" Zeed's scream rang out from right nearby. He had seen it too. Even Zeed, who had fought on countless battlefields, must have instantly realized the absolute disparity in power.

But in response to that voice, Olog-Zei's gaze began to shift ever so slightly.

"Zeed!" Riot deflected the flying debris with herfists and bravely stood up on her left leg.

But Zeed also sprang to his feet on the spot, letting out a scream that sounded as if he were in a daze.

"No! Stop! It's impossible!"

Immediately afterward, Olog-Zei let out a dry, guttural roar. The old man's chest cracked and snapped as his ribs pierced through his skin.

At the same time, an eyeball roughly ten meters in diameter burst forth from the depths of his torn chest.

As the blood-red pupil flashed, a wave of scorching heat and shockwaves swept through the area.

"Tch!"

"Gah!"

Riot and Zeed screamed in unison and tumbled to the ground. A massive wave of intense heat raced mercilessly over their heads. The shockwave raged, trying to blow their bodies deep into the underground cavern.

(If this keeps up...) They couldn't even get close, let alone defeat it.

Just as Riot was crawling along the ground, on the verge of giving up...

"Hold on! Both of you, quick!" The glow of the rare gem Metolite shone before them. Justice, who had narrowly escaped, was extending her Holy War Branch.

Riot hurriedly grabbed the staff with her left hand and grabbed Zeed by the collar with her right. "Sorry! I'm throwing you, Zeed!" Without waiting for a reply, she pulled Zeed toward her and hurled him toward Justice. Though he had no strength to dodge, Zeed crashed into a stalactite but was rescued from the storm's path.

"Damn it! I'm an amputee — you could be more careful witg me, you know!" Despite his cursing, he extended his right leg toward Riot.

Held by Zeed's leg and Justice's staff, Riot finally reached the shelter behind the rock.

"Hey, you better mean what you said earlier!" Zeed shouted at Justice, breathing heavily. "Even in that state, can you still defeat him with your miracle?"

Justice remained silent for a moment, ignoring the question. From behind the rock, he silently looked up at the Demon God's colossal form, scrutinizing its hideous body in detail.

"Look. The tentacles are still contracting and expanding. That's proof it hasn't regained its full size. And above all, it isn't continuing its attacks. A true Demon General-class being should be able to repeat its current attacks without pause."

"You're right," Riot nodded, looking up at the colossal form as well.

The glowing eyeballs were billowing steam, and the light in the pupils had vanished.

"Justice, how long do you think it'll be until the next strike?"

"I'd like to believe it'll take a while longer. The amount of magical energy being released should be unstable, too."

Hearing this, Riot and Zeed checked their retinal displays.

Realizing that Justice's insight was correct, Zeed looked at the boy with a look of astonishment.

"To look at that and not even flinch... Who are you, anyway?"

"I told you, I'm a Holy War Officer."

Feeling encouraged by that smile, Riot renewed her fighting spirit. "I see... I guess I have no choice but to strike precisely at the weakest point."

"If I knew that, I wouldn't be in this mess, would I?"

“Stop flinching and take a good look at our opponent.” Giving Zeed a nudge with her elbow, Riot pointed at the Demon God’s enormous eyeball.

“See those nerve-like fibers tangled around the base of the eyeball? Can you see them pulsing?”

“Yeah, I can. So that’s how it’s channeling attack power into the eyeball, huh? Hey!”

Riot smiled at the astonished Zeed. “Exactly. I’m going to slice right through that spot - it looks like the weakest point.”

“Got it. Then I’d better get ready to amplify the miracle and apply the delay effect.” Justice nodded deeply at his partner’s words.

But Zeed was utterly dumbfounded by the complete lack of objection to this suicide mission. “You’re going to charge right in there? Are you planning to climb up the Demon God’s body? It’s at least fifty meters tall! Before you even get that far, if you take the next hit, it’s all over for you!”

“I’ll manage somehow. More importantly, you stay hidden.” Using her greatsword as a cane, Riot staggered to her feet.

“When Justice uses his last miracle… please, you’re my only hope.”

“Hey, wait, Riot! You!”

Without exchanging a single word of farewell, Riot winked at Justice.

Justice nodded back and formed the sacred seal with all his might.

The next moment, Riot leaped over the rocky terrain using her left leg and the greatsword.

"N•Gazei... N-Gaolog... Iriiri, Olog-Zei..." Twisting his massive body, the Demon General Olog-Zei listened. He began to turn the eyeball on his chest toward Riot, who was scampering about at his feet. The target’s nerve fibers pulsed more intensely, and the glow in its pupils gradually grew stronger.

“This is crazy — he won’t wait for us!” But Riot calmly unfastened a grenade from her waist, pulled the pin, and tossed it into the air. “This might be a cheap trick, but...!”

"N-Gaze… Oooooh!" At the moment of detonation, the Demon God’s massive body definitely staggered. What he had thrown was not just a fragmentation grenade. It was a flashbang grenade designed for suppression. In front of the Demon God’s eyes, intense flashes of light erupted one after another.

Having lost its focus, the Evil Spirit swayed from side to side several times, yet still desperately dilated its pupils.

"N-Ga-Zei! N-Ga-Olog! Iriiri, Olog-Zei!" Its eyeball fired a blast in a random direction. The seawall was crushed, and countless pieces of debris flew into the air. That very instant was the moment Riot had been waiting for.

“There won’t be a next time!” Riot stretched out her right arm toward the Demon General above her. The panel on her wrist flipped open, revealing the launch mechanism for the ultra-hard wire. At the same time, the targeting function activated simultaneously in the Battle Armor Demon’s retinas, locking onto the Demon God’s chest.

"Target confirmed. Locked on until further instructions. Current distance: 57.82 meters. Ultra-hard wire launch ready."

“Then let’s go! Fire the wire!” Riot shouted at her artificial combat brain and sent the launch signal to her right arm.

Two thin, black metal fibers were fired toward the sky. The tough wire rose up to the Demon God’s chest and began wrapping itself around his nerve fibers. Furthermore, when the sharp claws at the tip pierced his artery, a distinct sensation was transmitted to Riot’s arm.

"Retrieval speed: 4 meters per second. Maximum limit. No instruction to change speed. Retrieval commencing."

Suddenly, Riot's body was hoisted into the air. Gripping the wire in her right hand and the electromagnetic greatsword in her left, she closed in on the Evil Spirit in one swift motion.

"Justice, I'm counting on you!" Riot, having locked onto her target, thrust the greatsword overhead. Before her eyes lay pulsating nerve fibers, and towering far above them was the face of a transcendent being. Just as the wrinkled, withered face looked down at Riot, a pure voice rose from the ground.

"Miracle Amplification Ready!" Justice, having formed the sacred seal, opened her eyes wide with intensity. "Delay effect attached, simultaneous activation ready! Final Strike!" A massive burst of holy light erupted from Justice's fingertips. "Sacred Inferno Downfall!" The holy light surged from Justice toward Riot. As it traveled, the Evil God let out a cry of revulsion.

"N-Ga-Zei! N-Ga-Olog! Iri-Iri, Olog-Zei!" The Evil God's face contorted into a hideous grimace. He opened his mouth, baring massive fangs at Riot.

But a band of sacred energy rapidly coiled around Riot's greatsword. A tingling, numbing vibration coursed through his gripping hand - the amplified strike possessed a power so great that even Riot could not fully control it with just her left hand.

"It's not your time to rise yet...!" Even so, she raised the blade imbued with Justice's power high above her head. "Time to show that Saint Paul still exists in this era!"

She roared, then brought the blade crashing down. The greatsword pierced the nerves supporting the eyeball, and immediately, a miracle erupted.

"NGAZEI! N-Ga-Olog! Iri-Iri, Olog-Zei!" The Sacred Inferno Strike traveled along the nerve fibers, shattering the Evil God's crimson eyeball.

Meanwhile, the power that had flowed into Olog Zei's body triggered yet another explosion. Nerve fibers burst apart above Riot's head, and the wires burned away.

"Aaaaaaah!" Having lost her footing, Riott was hurled into the midst of the shockwave with a deafening roar.

The last thing she remembered was an overflowing holy light.

"Ri... Riot..." That holy light was also seared into the eyes of Justice on the ground. The pale-blue light of the Creator God burned away every inch of the evil god Olog Zei's massive body. But with no strength left to check on his partner's condition, the boy sank to his knees where he stood.

"Hold onto me, Justice!" The young Holy War Officer, having exhausted all his strength, reacted only to those words.

The moment he collapsed onto the back of Zeed, who had rushed over, Justice lost consciousness. At the same time, the surrounding walls crumbled, and a blast of hot wind erupted from the bottom of the fissure.

"Riot! Riot!" No one answered his call.

The agonizing Evil God eventually lost its form and began to melt into a gooey mass. Biting his lip, Zeed ran off with the collapsing underground cavern behind him.

From behind, as if in pursuit, he could hear the Evil God's gasping breaths.

"N-Gazei… N-Gaolog... Iriiri, Olog..."

That was the death rattle of the city known as Zozwell.

【Epilogue】

“Look...”

From the top of a hill, Rachel looked down upon the city of the Evil God. Where she pointed, the bizarre silhouette of Zozwell loomed overhead. From the base of that twisted cluster of structures, a band of pale blue light streamed upward into the sky.

“It’s the Holy Light. It appears that Lord Justice has…” As if braving the howling black wind, Ilsie strained her eyes to look. The pale blue holy light scorched the city to the ground, shattering the trees that had been swaying. As the charred, otherworldly plants scattered flames, the buildings melted away with a deafening roar.

The mercenaries who had escaped Zozwell watched the scene with bated breath.

“We’ll be okay, won’t we, everyone…” Rachel murmured, as if seeking reassurance. As if scolding her timid voice, the demon hound Gustav let out a series of growls.

Smiling, Rachel stroked the back of his neck. “I know. I was just a little worried…”

“Hey, look at that…!” Someone pointed sharply at a spot far below.

Everyone’s gaze focused there.

Beyond the black dust, two figures finally appeared.

“It’s the captain! Captain Zeed!”

“The Holy War Officer is there too!”

“Zeed!”

With that shout, the mercenaries all started running at once. Leading the way, Rachel ran straight towards hee beloved. The mercenary captain set Justice, whom he had been carrying on his back, down on the ground. Zeed waved his severed arms and smiled at his comrades.

“I’m back, just as I promised.”

“You’re late, you idiot!” Rachel threw herself into his relieved face. She shoved Zeed to the ground and collapsed into his chest, sobbing uncontrollably.

“You’re the idiot! Everyone’s watching! Have you lost your mind?”

“Shut up! Let me cry!” Completely ignoring Zeed’s protests, Rachel let out a thunderous wail.

The mercenaries gathered around them could only clap in astonishment.

“Hey there, the sun’s still high in the sky, Captain!”

“That’s a bit too open, don’t you think? Just when I thought I was saved, you go and do that?”

Surrounded by laughter, Zeed couldn’t say a word in response.

Meanwhile, Ilsie was helping Justice, who had been laid down on the sand, sit up. “Lord Justice, please pull yourself together!” Ilsie gently shook him, but the boy showed no sign of waking from his slumber. He merely let the Heretical Crest glow dimly in both his hands.

“Lord Justice…” Ilsie gazed at his glowing hands for a moment, then gently clasped them in her own.

Zeed, Rachel, and the mercenaries all silently followed her gaze. Yet there was not a trace of fear or unease in any of their eyes. Only gazes of appreciation for the Holy Warrior who had finished the battle surrounded Justice.

“You did well. It feels a bit presumptuous of me to say so, but…” Zeed sat up and murmured. “He’s a fine Holy Warrior, this one…”

With tears streaming down her face, Ilsie nodded in agreement.

But then, suddenly realizing something, Rachel turned to look behind her.

“That’s right, what about Riot…!” This time, everyone’s gaze turned toward Zozwell, which was burning to the ground.

Deprived of its magical power, the city was slowly melting away into the parched desert.

Before they knew it, the black wind had died down, and his vision gradually cleared.

Then, from beyond the wind, a shadow dragging her body along came into view. “You’re safe! Riot!” As Rachel shouted, cheers rose from the mercenaries.

Greeted by their voices, Riot, leaning on her sword, let out a sigh of relief.

(It’s over... Justice.....)

Seeing the boy in Ilsie’s arms, Riot felt all the strength drain from her body.

Joy shone in everyone’s eyes. There was no doubt or fear there. Overcome by that relief, Riot collapsed onto the ground.

The voices of the mercenaries rushing toward her gradually faded into the distance. For now, she just wanted to bask in this pleasant exhaustion.

“Thank goodness... Riot is safe too...” Ilsie wiped away her tears and spoke to the sleeping Justice. Then she swallowed the sobs welling up inside her. “I mean it... thank you...”

A tear fell onto Justice’s cheek.

At that glistening drop, Zeed nodded silently. The mercenary captain’s heart echoed with the cheers of his comrades, and Rachel’s tearful voice seeped into his thoughts.

Savoring the moments he never wanted to lose, Zeed continued to clench the scorching sand in his fist.

“Is it over…?”

In response to the red sphere’s question, the black sphere nodded calmly. “Not in Zozwell. But look at this…”

A three-dimensional image of a planet materialized in the open white space.

Countless points of light flickered across the vast, crimson-black New Continent. "This is the location where signs of an Evil God’s resurrection have been observed over the past month."

"I don't remember such incidents being this frequent…" As if groaning, the black sphere stared intently at the planetary map for a moment. “And they’re limited to those of the Evil God General rank and above...”

The green sphere that had appeared added in a calm, feminine voice. “Even those who perished during the Age of Ancient Calamity are beginning to regain their power. If the positions of the vanished constellations are correct... the time is near.”

And one after another, glowing spheres gathered around the planetary map.

The twelve spheres formed a circle, illuminating the planet with their combined light.

"So this marks the dawn of a new era. Well, I suppose it cannot be helped." The golden sphere sighed in a youthful voice. "It was all foreseen. It simply means that very few are ready for it."
"We are not omnipotent." The white sphere muttered bitterly in a wrinkled voice. “We cannot foresee the entire future of this planet. However, we must explore every possibility.”
The assembly nodded in agreement.
Suddenly, dark red clouds began to surge up on the planetary map.
At this sight, the golden sphere let out a resigned voice. “To be present at such a turning point in history... In any case, let us give thanks to our Creator. This trial will determine the planet’s fate.”
Receiving their shared resolve, the golden sphere formed a sacred seal.
“May we, the human race, receive further divine protection...”
“...so that we may fight the coming... calamity of the New Continent...”
The twelve thoughts merged as one, and their prayer enveloped the entire planet.

【Afterword by Takeo Ichikawa】

And so, thanks to all of you, we’ve reached Volume 3.

Fittingly, following “Volume 1 = Winter Break” and “Volume 2 = Summer Break,” this third volume is being released right in the middle of spring break. Whether you’re a student or not, I hope you’ll pick up a copy to enjoy during your holiday.

Come to think of it, it’s been years since I’ve had much to do with “such-and-such breaks.”
Setting aside my student days, my time in the workforce — which I did, at least to some extent — was spent working at a store inside a department store, so my schedule was mostly weekends on, weekdays off. And of course, holidays and the end-of-year/New Year’s period were peak seasons. I never took a solid block of time off for summer vacation or anything like that.
(The only time I took a solid block of time off back then was when I dropped a stereo speaker from my home right onto my right big toe, fracturing it, and was told it would take five weeks to heal.)
Now, however, every day is both a workday and a day off—that’s the kind of life I lead.
“I have to be at the office by this time / or I have to stay until this time.”
When I first started working in a world free from such constraints, my daily rhythm got pretty thrown off. Which is only natural, of course.
I found that I felt more at ease late at night, when everything was dead quiet, and it was easier to write, so at first I became a night owl. But that was a mistake.
I’d work on my manuscript until around 6 a.m., but naturally, I’d get hungry in the middle of the night.
But if I ate until I was full around 2 a.m. every night, my weight would inevitably end up in a ridiculous and pitiful state.

On top of that, I'd be sleeping through the best time of day for exercise, which obviously isn't good for my health.
Nowadays, I head to a sports club about a ten-minute walk away and do some light exercise.
Thanks to that, the weight I'd temporarily gained has returned to normal. I check my body fat every day, too.
In this healthy state, I've finished writing this third volume.
Ever since I wrote about the cold city in the previous volume, I decided early on, "Next up, it's going to be a scorching desert."
Now that we're on the third volume, both Justice and Riot move around smoothly, making this a fun book to write.
I hope it turned out to be an enjoyable read for you, the readers, as well.
If you have any opinions or feedback, please feel free to write to me.
Also, in the afterword of Volume 2, I mentioned, "The illustrator, Poporucha, has a website," and I'm surprised to see that so many of you have visited it.
Poporucha herself says she's been receiving direct messages from fans, which has been a huge encouragement. If you haven't seen her beautiful illustrations yet, please do check them out!
From here on out, the story will head even deeper into its climax. Please continue to follow along with us.
After all, not a single mystery has been solved yet...
It looks like it will still take some time before we reach the end of this journey.
Until then, let's meet again on the new battlefield of Justice and Riot.

February 22, 2002

Takeo Ichikawa

《Song Title / Band Name / Album Title / Year of Release》

NOVEMBER RAIN	GUNS N ROSES	(USE YOUR ILLUSION 1)	1991
JUGULATOR	JUDAS PRIEST	(JUGULATOR)	1997
SOUND CHASER	YES	(RELAYER)	1974
STONE COLD CRAZY	QUEEN	(SHEER HEART ATTACK)	1974
ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWER	BOB DYLAN	(JOHN WESLEY HARDING)	1967
OUTSIDE THE WALL	PINK FLOYD	(THE WALL)	1979
MINE ALL MINE	VAN HALEN	(OU812)	1988
WAR PIGS	BLACK SABBATH	(PARANOID)	1970
SAD WINGS OF DESTINY	JUDAS PRIEST	(SAD WINGS OF DEASTINY)	1977
BED OF ROSES	BON JOVI	(KEEP THE FAITH)	1992
DAZED AND CONFUSED	LED ZEPPELIN	(LED ZEPPELIN)	1968

Translator's note:

Greetings all! NineSoulsSea here, hope you enjoyed this translation of **Takeo Ichikawa**'s light novel, **Dark Frontier Blues 3**! As usual, a special thank you goes out to aNobody101 for telling me the method of obtaining BookWalker raws which I used when translating this light novel and will, hopefully, continue to use! I liked this one way more than the second book – the characters were fun, there were actual stakes, everyone got to do something and Riot got her first actual win! I do wonder how the series will conclude, but neither I nor you guys will have to wait for long, for the translation for **Dark Frontier Blues 4** is next! Get excited!

And that's about it! Thank you for reading and have a magical day!